

AUGSBURG COLLEGE LIBRARY



3 0510 02064 5422

GES

RE DRAWN

# The Prodigal Village

Ring  
Heller



MERRILL COMPANY

Established 1838

1  
1Q3  
P

Augsburg Seminary  
Library

**WITHDRAWN**  
Augsburg Seminary  
Library









Digitized by the Internet Archive  
in 2021 with funding from  
Kahle/Austin Foundation

<https://archive.org/details/prodigalvillage0000unse>



# THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE



# THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

## A Christmas Tale

*By*  
**IRVING BACHELLER**

*Author of*  
**THE LIGHT IN THE CLEARING**  
**A MAN FOR THE AGES, Etc.**

INDIANAPOLIS  
**THE BOBBS-MERRILL COMPANY**  
PUBLISHERS

COPYRIGHT 1920  
AMERICAN NATIONAL RED CROSS

---

COPYRIGHT 1920  
IRVING BACHELLER

*Printed in the United States of America*

PRESS OF  
BRAUNWORTH & CO.  
BOOK MANUFACTURERS  
BROOKLYN, N. Y.

B12  
XP

## CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I WHICH INTRODUCES THE SHEPHERD OF THE BIRDS . . . . .	1
II THE FOUNDING OF THE PHYLLISTINES . . . . .	18
III WHICH TELLS OF THE COMPLAINING COIN AND THE MAN WHO LOST HIS SELF . . . . .	68
IV IN WHICH MR. ISRAEL SNEED AND OTHER WORKING MEN RECEIVE A LESSON IN TRUE DEMOCRACY . . . . .	91
V IN WHICH J. PATTERSON BING BUYS A NECKLACE OF PEARLS . . . . .	103
VI IN WHICH HIRAM BLENKINSOP HAS A NUMBER OF ADVENTURES . . . . .	117
VII IN WHICH HIGH VOLTAGE DEVELOPS IN THE CONVERSATION . . . . .	137
VIII IN WHICH JUDGE CROOKER DELIVERS A FEW OPINIONS . . . . .	146
IX WHICH TELLS OF A MERRY CHRISTMAS DAY IN THE LITTLE COTTAGE OF THE WIDOW MORAN . . . . .	163

1930



# THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE



# THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

## CHAPTER ONE

WHICH INTRODUCES THE SHEPHERD OF  
THE BIRDS

THE day that Henry Smix met and embraced Gasoline Power and went up Main Street hand in hand with it is not yet forgotten. It was a hasty marriage, so to speak, and the results of it were truly deplorable. Their little journey produced an effect on the nerves and the remote future history of Bingville. They rushed at a group of citizens who were watching them, scattered it hither and thither, broke down a section of Mrs. Risley's picket fence and ran over a small boy. At the end of their brief misalli-

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

ance, Gasoline Power seemed to express its opinion of Mr. Smix by hurling him against a telegraph pole and running wild in the park until it cooled its passion in the fountain pool. In the language of Hiram Blenkinsop, the place was badly "smixed up." Yet Mr. Smix was the object of unmerited criticism. He was like many other men in that quiet village—slow, deliberate, harmless and good-natured. The action of his intellect was not at all like that of a gasoline engine. Between the swiftness of the one and the slowness of the other, there was a wide zone full of possibilities. The engine had accomplished many things while Mr. Smix's intellect was getting ready to begin to act.

In speaking of this adventure, Hiram Blenkinsop made a wise remark: "My married life learnt me one thing," said he. "If you are thinkin' of hitchin' up a wild horse with a tame one, be careful that

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

the tame one is the stoutest or it will do him no good."

The event had its tragic side and whatever Hiram Blenkinsop and other citizens of questionable taste may have said of it, the historian has no intention of treating it lightly. Mr. Smix and his neighbor's fence could be repaired but not the small boy—Robert Emmet Moran, six years old, the son of the Widow Moran who took in washing. He was in the nature of a sacrifice to the new god. He became a beloved cripple, known as the Shepherd of the Birds and altogether the most cheerful person in the village. His world was a little room on the second floor of his mother's cottage overlooking the big flower garden of Judge Crooker—his father having been the gardener and coachman of the Judge. There were in this room an old pine bureau, a four post bedstead, an armchair by the window, a small round nickel clock, that sat on the

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

bureau, a rubber tree and a very talkative little old tin soldier of the name of Bloggs who stood erect on a shelf with a gun in his hand and was always looking out of the window. The day of the tin soldier's arrival the boy had named him Mr. Bloggs and discovered his unusual qualities of mind and heart. He was a wise old soldier, it would seem, for he had some sort of answer for each of the many questions of Bob Moran. Indeed, as Bob knew, he had seen and suffered much, having traveled to Europe and back with the Judge's family and been sunk for a year in a frog pond and been dropped in a jug of molasses, but through it all had kept his look of inextinguishable courage. The lonely lad talked, now and then, with the round, nickel clock or the rubber-tree or the pine bureau, but mostly gave his confidence to the wise and genial Mr. Bloggs. When the spring arrived the garden, with its birds and flowers, became a source of

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

joy and companionship for the little lad. Sitting by the open window, he used to talk to Pat Crowley, who was getting the ground ready for sowing. Later the slow procession of the flowers passed under the boy's window and greeted him with its fragrance and color.

But his most intimate friends were the birds. Robins, in the elm tree just beyond the window, woke him every summer morning. When he made his way to the casement, with the aid of two ropes which spanned his room, they came to him lighting on his wrists and hands and clamoring for the seeds and crumbs which he was wont to feed them. Indeed, little Bob Moran soon learned the pretty lingo of every feathered tribe that camped in the garden. He could sound the pan pipe of the robin, the fairy flute of the oriole, the noisy guitar of the bobolink and the little piccolo of the song sparrow. Many of these dear friends of his came into the

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

room and explored the rubber tree and sang in its branches. A colony of barn swallows lived under the eaves of the old weathered shed on the far side of the garden. There were many windows, each with a saucy head looking out of it. Suddenly half a dozen of these merry people would rush into the air and fill it with their frolic. They were like a lot of laughing schoolboys skating over invisible hills and hollows.

With a pair of field-glasses, which Mrs. Crooker had loaned to him, Bob Moran had learned the nest habits of the whole summer colony in that wonderful garden. All day he sat by the open window with his work, an air gun at his side. The robins would shout a warning to Bob when a cat strolled into that little paradise. Then he would drop his brushes, seize his gun and presently its missile would go whizzing through the air, straight against the side of the cat, who, feeling the sting of it, would bound through the flower beds

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

and leap over the fence to avoid further punishment. Bob had also made an electric search-light out of his father's old hunting jack and, when those red-breasted policemen sounded their alarm at night, he was out of bed in a jiffy and sweeping the tree tops with a broom of light, the jack on his forehead. If he discovered a pair of eyes, the stinging missiles flew toward them in the light stream until the intruder was dislodged. Indeed, he was like a shepherd of old, keeping the wolves from his flock. It was the parish priest who first called him the Shepherd of the Birds.

Just opposite his window was the stub of an old pine partly covered with Virginia creeper. Near the top of it was a round hole and beyond it a small cavern which held the nest of a pair of flickers. Sometimes the female sat with her gray head protruding from this tiny oriel window of hers looking across at Bob. Pat Crowley was in the habit of calling this

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

garden "Moran City," wherein the stub was known as Woodpecker Tower and the flower bordered path as Fifth Avenue while the widow's cottage was always referred to as City Hall and the weathered shed as the tenement district.

What a theater of unpremeditated art was this beautiful, big garden of the Judge! There were those who felt sorry for Bob Moran but his life was fuller and happier than theirs. It is doubtful if any of the world's travelers saw more of its beauty than he.

He had sugared the window-sill so that he always had company—bees and wasps and butterflies. The latter had interested him since the Judge had called them "stray thoughts of God." Their white, yellow and blue wings were always flashing in the warm sunlit spaces of the garden. He loved the chorus of an August night and often sat by his window listen-

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

ing to the songs of the tree crickets and katydids and seeing the innumerable firefly lanterns flashing among the flowers.

His work was painting scenes in the garden, especially bird tricks and attitudes. For this, he was indebted to Susan Baker, who had given him paints and brushes and taught him how to use them, and to an unusual aptitude for drawing.

One day Mrs. Baker brought her daughter Pauline with her—a pretty blue-eyed girl with curly blonde hair, four years older than Bob, who was thirteen when his painting began. The Shepherd looked at her with an exclamation of delight; until then he had never seen a beautiful young maiden. Homely, ill-clad daughters of the working folk had come to his room with field flowers now and then, but no one like Pauline. He felt her hair and looked wistfully into her face and said that she was like pink and white and yellow roses. She was a discovery—a new

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

kind of human being. Often he thought of her as he sat looking out of the window and often he dreamed of her at night.

The little Shepherd of the Birds was not quite a boy. He was a spirit untouched by any evil thought, unbroken to lures and thorny ways. He still had the heart of childhood and saw only the beauty of the world. He was like the flowers and birds of the garden, strangely fair and winsome, with silken, dark hair curling about his brows. He had large, clear, brown eyes, a mouth delicate as a girl's and teeth very white and shapely. The Bakers had lifted the boundaries of his life and extended his vision. He found a new joy in studying flower forms and in imitating their colors on canvas.

Now, indeed, there was not a happier lad in the village than this young prisoner in one of the two upper bedrooms in the small cottage of the Widow Moran. True, he had moments of longing for his lost

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

freedom when he heard the shouts of the boys in the street and their feet hurrying by on the sidewalk. The steadfast and courageous Mr. Bloggs had said: "I guess we have just as much fun as they do, after all. Look at them roses."

One evening, as his mother sat reading an old love tale to the boy, he stopped her.

"Mother," he said, "I love Pauline. Do you think it would be all right for me to tell her?"

"Never a word," said the good woman. "Ye see it's this way, my little son, ye're like a priest an' it's not the right thing for a priest."

"I don't want to be a priest," said he impatiently.

"Tut, tut, my laddie boy! It's for God to say an' for us to obey," she answered.

When the widow had gone to her room for the night and Bob was thinking it over, Mr. Bloggs remarked that in his opinion

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

they should keep up their courage for it was a very grand thing to be a priest after all.

Winters he spent deep in books out of Judge Crooker's library and tending his potted plants and painting them and the thick blanket of snow in the garden. Among the happiest moments of his life were those that followed his mother's return from the post-office with *The Bingville Sentinel*. Then, as the widow was wont to say, he was like a dog with a bone. To him, Bingville was like Rome in the ancient world or London in the British Empire. All roads led to Bingville. The *Sentinel* was in the nature of a habit. One issue was like unto another—as like as “two chaws off the same plug of tobacco,” a citizen had once said. Its editor performed his jokes with a wink and a nudge as if he were saying, “I will now touch the light guitar.” Anything important in

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

the *Sentinel* would have been as misplaced as a cannon in a meeting-house. Every week it caught the toy balloons of gossip, the thistledown events which were floating in the still air of Bingville. The *Sentinel* was a dissipation as enjoyable and as inexplicable as tea. It contained portraits of leading citizens, accounts of sundry goings and comings, and teas and parties and student frolics.

To the little Shepherd, Bingville was the capital of the world and Mr. J. Patterson Bing, the first citizen of Bingville, who employed eleven hundred men and had four automobiles, was a gigantic figure whose shadow stretched across the earth. There were two people much in his thoughts and dreams and conversation—Pauline Baker and J. Patterson Bing. Often there were articles in the *Sentinel* regarding the great enterprises of Mr. Bing and the social successes of the Bing family in the metropolis. These he read with hungry

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

interest. His favorite heroes were George Washington, St. Francis and J. Patterson Bing. As between the three he would, secretly, have voted for Mr. Bing. Indeed, he and his friends and intimates—Mr. Bloggs and the rubber tree and the little pine bureau and the round nickel clock—had all voted for Mr. Bing. But he had never seen the great man.

Mr. Bing sent Mrs. Moran a check every Christmas and, now and then, some little gift to Bob, but his charities were strictly impersonal. He used to say that while he was glad to help the poor and the sick, he hadn't time to call on them. Once, Mrs. Bing promised the widow that she and her husband would go to see Bob on Christmas Day. The little Shepherd asked his mother to hang his best pictures on the walls and to decorate them with sprigs of cedar. He put on his starched shirt and collar and silk tie and a new black coat which his mother had given him.

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

The Christmas bells never rang so merrily.

The great white bird in the Congregational Church tower—that being Bob's thought of it—flew out across the valley with its tidings of good will.

To the little Shepherd it seemed to say:  
“Bing—Bing—Bing—Bing—Bing—Bing!  
Com-ing, Com-ing, Com-ing!!”

Many of the friends of his mother—mostly poor folk of the parish who worked in the mill—came with simple gifts and happy greetings. There were those among them who thought it a blessing to look upon the sweet face of Bob and to hear his merry laughter over some playful bit of gossip and Judge Crooker said that they were quite right about it. Mr. and Mrs. J. Patterson Bing were never to feel this blessing. The Shepherd of the Birds waited in vain for them that Christmas Day. Mrs. Bing sent a letter of kindly

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

greeting and a twenty-dollar gold piece and explained that her husband was not feeling "quite up to the mark," which was true.

"I'm not going," he said decisively, when Mrs. Bing brought the matter up as he was smoking in the library an hour or so after dinner. "No cripples and misery in mine at present, thank you! I wouldn't get over it for a week. Just send them our best wishes and a twenty-dollar gold piece."

There were tears in the Shepherd's eyes when his mother helped him into his night clothes that evening.

"I hate that twenty-dollar gold piece!" he exclaimed.

"Laddie boy! Why should ye be sayin' that?"

The shiny piece of metal was lying on the window-sill. She took it in her hand.

"It's as cold as a snow-bank!" she exclaimed.

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

“I don’t want to touch it! I’m shivering now,” said the Shepherd. “Put it away in the drawer. It makes me sick. It cheated me out of seeing Mr. Bing.”

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE FOUNDING OF THE PHYLLISTINES

ONE little word largely accounted for the success of J. Patterson Bing. It was the word "no." It saved him in moments which would have been full of peril for other men. He had never made a bad investment because he knew how and when to say "no." It fell from his lips so sharply and decisively that he lost little time in the consideration of doubtful enterprises. Sometimes it fell heavily and left a wound, for which Mr. Bing thought himself in no way responsible. There was really a lot of good-will in him. He didn't mean to hurt any one.

"Time is a thing of great value and what's the use of wasting it in idle palaver?" he used to say.

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

One day, Hiram Blenkinsop, who was just recovering from a spree, met Mr. Bing at the corner of Main and School Streets and asked him for the loan of a dollar.

“*No sir!*” said Mr. J. Patterson Bing, and the words sounded like two whacks of a hammer on a nail. “*No sir,*” he repeated, the second whack being now the more emphatic. “I don’t lend money to people who make a bad use of it.”

“Can you give me work?” asked the unfortunate drunkard.

“No! But if you were a hired girl, I’d consider the matter.”

Some people who overheard the words laughed loudly. Poor Blenkinsop made no reply but he considered the words an insult to his manhood in spite of the fact that he hadn’t any manhood to speak of. At least, there was not enough of it to stand up and be insulted—that is sure. After that he was always racking his brain for something mean to say about

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

J. Patterson Bing. Bing was a cold-blooded fish. Bing was a scrimper and a grinder. If the truth were known about Bing he wouldn't be holding his head so high. Judas Iscariot and J. Patterson Bing were off the same bush. These were some of the things that Blenkinsop scattered abroad and they were, to say the least of them, extremely unjust. Mr. Bing's innocent remark touching Mr. Blenkinsop's misfortune in not being a hired girl, arose naturally out of social conditions in the village. Furthermore, it is quite likely that every one in Bingville, including those impersonal creatures known as Law and Order, would have been much happier if some magician could have turned Mr. Blenkinsop into a hired girl and have made him a life member of "the Dish Water Aristocracy," as Judge Crooker was wont to call it.

The community of Bingville was noted for its simplicity and good sense. Ser-

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

vants were unknown in this village of three thousand people. It had lawyers and doctors and professors and merchants—some of whom were deservedly well known—and J. Patterson Bing, the owner of the pulp mill, celebrated for his riches; but one could almost say that its most sought for and popular folk were its hired girls. They were few and sniffy. They exercised care and discretion in the choice of their employers. They regulated the diet of the said employers and the frequency and quality of their entertainments. If it could be said that there was an aristocracy in the place they were it. First, among the Who's Who of Bingville, were the Gilligan sisters who worked in the big brick house of Judge Crooker; another was Mrs. Pat Collins, seventy-two years of age, who presided in the kitchen of the Reverend Otis Singleton; the two others were Susan Crowder, a woman of sixty, and a red-headed girl with one eye, of the name

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

of Featherstraw, both of whom served the opulent Bings. Some of these hired girls ate with the family—save on special occasions when city folk were present. Mrs. Collins and the Gilligans seemed to enjoy this privilege but Susan Crowder, having had an ancestor who had fought in the Revolutionary War, couldn't stand it, and Martha Featherstraw preferred to eat in the kitchen. Indeed there was some warrant for this remarkable situation. The Gilligan sisters had a brother who was a Magistrate in a large city and Mrs. Collins had a son who was a successful and popular butcher in the growing city of Hazelmead.

That part of the village known as Irish-town and a settlement of Poles and Italians furnished the man help in the mill, and its sons were also seen more or less in the fields and gardens. Ambition and Education had been working in the minds of the young in and about Bingville for two

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

generations. The sons and daughters of farmers and ditch-diggers had read Virgil and Horace and plodded into the mysteries of higher mathematics. The best of them had gone into learned professions; others had enlisted in the business of great cities; still others had gone in for teaching or stenography.

Their success had wrought a curious devastation in the village and countryside. The young moved out heading for the paths of glory. Many a sturdy, stupid person who might have made an excellent plumber, or carpenter, or farmer, or cook, armed with a university degree and a sense of superiority, had gone forth in quest of fame and fortune prepared for nothing in particular and achieving firm possession of it. Somehow the elective system had enabled them "to get by" in a state of mind that resembled the Mojave Desert. If they did not care for Latin or mathematics they could take a course in Hier-

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

ology or in *The Taming of the Wild Chickadee* or in some such easy skating. Bingville was like many places. The young had fled from the irksome tasks which had roughened the hands and bent the backs of their parents. That, briefly, accounts for the fewness and the sniffiness above referred to.

Early in 1917, the village was shaken by alarming and astonishing news. True, the sinking of the *Lusitania* and our own enlistment in the World War and the German successes on the Russian frontier had, in a way, prepared the heart and intellect of Bingville for shocking events. Still, these disasters had been remote. The fact that the Gilligan sisters had left the Crookers and accepted an offer of one hundred and fifty dollars a month from the wealthy Nixons of Hazelmead was an event close to the footlights, so to speak. It caused the news of battles to take its rightful place in the distant background. Men talked of this event in stores and on

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

street corners; it was the subject of conversation in sewing circles and the Philomathian Literary Club. That day, the Bings whispered about it at the dinner table between courses until Susan Crowder sent in a summons by Martha Featherstraw with the apple pie. She would be glad to see Mrs. J. Patterson Bing in the kitchen immediately after dinner. There was a moment of silence in the midst of which Mr. Bing winked knowingly at his wife, who turned pale as she put down her pie fork with a look of determination and rose and went into the kitchen. Mrs. Crowder regretted that she and Martha would have to look for another family unless their wages were raised from one hundred to one hundred and fifty dollars a month.

“But, Susan, we all made an agreement for a year,” said Mrs. Bing.

Mrs. Crowder was sorry but she and Martha could not make out on the wages

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

they were getting—everything cost so much. If Mary Gilligan, who couldn't cook, was worth a hundred dollars a month Mrs. Crowder considered herself cheap at twice that figure.

Mrs. Bing, in her anger, was inclined to revolt, but Mr. Bing settled the matter by submitting to the tyranny of Susan. With Phyllis and three of her young friends coming from school and a party in prospect, there was nothing else to do.

Maggie Collins, who was too old and too firmly rooted in the village to leave it, was satisfied with a raise of ten dollars a month. Even then she received a third of the minister's salary. "His wife being a swell leddy who had no time for wurruk, sure the boy was no sooner married than he yelled for help," as Maggie was wont to say.

All this had a decided effect on the economic life of the village. Indeed,

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

Hiram Blenkinsop, the village drunkard, who attended to the lawns and gardens for a number of people, demanded an increase of a dollar a day in his wages on account of the high cost of living, although one would say that its effect upon him could not have been serious. For years the historic figure of Blenkinsop had been the destination and repository of the cast-off clothing and the worn and shapeless shoes of the leading citizens. For a decade, the venerable derby hat, which once belonged to Judge Crooker, had survived all the incidents of his adventurous career. He was, indeed, as replete with suggestive memories as the graveyard to which he was wont to repair for rest and recuperation in summer weather. There, in the shade of a locust tree hard by the wall, he was often discovered with his faithful dog Christmas—a yellow, mongrel, good-natured cur—lying beside him, and the historic derby hat in his hand. He

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

had a persevering pride in that hat. Mr. Blenkinsop showed a surprising and commendable industry under the stimulation of increased pay. He worked hard for a month, then celebrated his prosperity with a night of such noisy, riotous joy that he landed in the lockup with a black eye and a broken nose and an empty pocket. As usual, the dog Christmas went with him.

When there was a loud yell in the streets at night Judge Crooker used to say, "It's Hiram again! The poor fellow is out a-Hiraming."

William Snodgrass, the carpenter, gave much thought and reflection to the good fortune of the Gilligan girls. If a hired girl could earn twenty-five dollars a week and her board, a skilled mechanic who had to board himself ought to earn at least fifty. So he put up his prices. Israel Sneed, the plumber, raised his scale to correspond with that of the carpenter. The prices of the butcher and grocer kept pace

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

with the rise of wages. A period of unexampled prosperity set in.

Some time before, the Old Spirit of Bingville had received notice that its services would no longer be required. It had been an industrious and faithful Old Spirit. The new generation did not intend to be hard on it. They were willing to give it a comfortable home as long as it lived. Its home was to be a beautiful and venerable asylum called The Past. There it was to have nothing to do but to sit around and weep and talk of bygone days. The Old Spirit rebelled. It refused to abandon its appointed tasks.

The notice had been given soon after the new theater was opened in the Sneed Block, and the endless flood of moving lights and shadows began to fall on its screen. The low-born, purblind intellects of Bohemian New York began to pour their lewd fancies into this great stream that flowed through every city, town and village in the land.

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

They had no more compunction in the matter than a rattlesnake when it swallows a rabbit. To them, there were only two great, bare facts in life—male and female. The males, in their vulgar parlance, were either “wise guys” or “suckers”! The females were all “my dears.”

Much of this mental sewage smelled to heaven. But it paid. It was cheap and entertaining. It relieved the tedium of small-town life.

Judge Crooker was in the little theater the evening that the Old Spirit of Bingville received notice to quit. The sons and daughters and even the young children of the best families in the village were there. Scenes from the shady side of the great cities, bar-room adventures with pugilists and porcelain-faced women, the thin-ice skating of illicit love succeeded one another on the screen. The tender souls of the young received the impression that life in

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

the great world was mostly drunkenness, violence, lust, and Great White Waywardness of one kind or another.

Judge Crooker shook his head and his fist as he went out and expressed his view to Phyllis and her mother in the lobby. Going home, they called him an old prude. The knowledge that every night this false instruction was going on in the Sneed Block filled the good man with sorrow and apprehension. He complained to Mr. Leak, the manager, who said that he would like to give clean shows, but that he had to take what was sent him.

Soon a curious thing happened to the family of Mr. J. Patterson Bing. It acquired a new god—one that began, as the reader will have observed, with a small “g.” He was a boneless, India-rubber, obedient little god. For years the need of one like that had been growing in the Bing family. Since he had become a millionaire, Mr. Bing had found it necessary

## [THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

to spend a good deal of time and considerable money in New York. Certain of his banker friends in the metropolis had introduced him to the joys of the Great White Way and the card room of the Golden Age Club. Always he had been ill and disgruntled for a week after his return to the homely realities of Bingville. The shrewd intuitions of Mrs. Bing alarmed her. So Phyllis and John were packed off to private schools so that the good woman would be free to look after the imperiled welfare of the lamb of her flock—the great J. Patterson. She was really worried about him. After that, she always went with him to the city. She was pleased and delighted with the luxury of the Waldorf-Astoria, the costumes, the dinner parties, the theaters, the suppers, the cabaret shows. The latter shocked her a little at first.



## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

AUGSBURG COLLEGE & SEMINARY  
George Overduin Library  
MINNEAPOLIS 4, MINNESOTA

They went out to a great country house, near the city, to spend a week-end. There was a dinner party on Saturday night. One of the ladies got very tipsy and was taken up-stairs. The others repaired to the music room to drink their coffee and smoke. Mrs. Bing tried a cigarette and got along with it very well. Then there was an hour of heart to heart, central European dancing while the older men sat down for a night of bridge in the library. Sunday morning, the young people rode to hounds across country while the bridge party continued its session in the library. It was not exactly a restful week-end. J. Patterson and his wife went to bed, as soon as their grips were unpacked, on their return to the city and spent the day there with aching heads.

While they were eating dinner that night, the cocktail remarked with the lips of Mrs. Bing: "I'm getting tired of Bingville."

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

"Oh, of course, it's a picayune place," said J. Patterson.

"It's so provincial!" the lady exclaimed.

Soon, the oysters and the entree having subdued the cocktail, she ventured: "But it does seem to me that New York is an awfully wicked place."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Godless," she answered. "The drinking and gambling and those dances."

"That's because you've been brought up in a seven-by-nine Puritan village," J. Patterson growled very decisively. "Why shouldn't people enjoy themselves? We have trouble enough at best. God gave us bodies to get what enjoyment we could out of them. It's about the only thing we're sure of, anyhow."

It was a principle of Mrs. Bing to agree with J. Patterson. And why not? He was a great man. She knew it as well as he did and that was knowing it very well indeed. His judgment about many things

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

had been right—triumphantly and overwhelmingly right. Besides, it was the only comfortable thing to do. She had been the type of woman who reads those weird articles written by grass widows on “How to Keep the Love of a Husband.”

So it happened that the Bings began to construct a little god to suit their own tastes and habits—one about as tractable as a toy dog. They withdrew from the Congregational Church and had house parties for sundry visitors from New York and Hazelmead every week-end.

Phyllis returned from school in May with a spirit quite in harmony with that of her parents. She had spent the holidays at the home of a friend in New York and had learned to love the new dances and to smoke, although that was a matter to be mentioned only in a whisper and not in the presence of her parents. She was a tall, handsome girl with blue eyes, blonde hair, perfect teeth and complexion, and al-

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

most a perfect figure. Here she was, at last, brought up to the point of a coming-out party.

It had been a curious and rather unfortunate bringing up that the girl had suffered. She had been the pride of a mother's heart and the occupier of that position is apt to achieve great success in supplying a mother's friends with topics of conversation. Phyllis had been flattered and indulged. Mrs. Bing was entitled to much credit, having been born of poor and illiterate parents in a small village on the Hudson a little south of the Capital. She was pretty and grew up with a longing for better things. J. Patterson got her at a bargain in an Albany department store where she stood all day behind the notion counter. "At a bargain," it must be said, because, on the whole, there were higher values in her personality than in his. She had acquired that common Bertha Clay

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

habit of associating with noble lords who lived in cheap romances and had a taste for poor but honest girls. The practical J. Patterson hated that kind of thing. But his wife kept a supply of these highly flavored novels hidden in the little flat and spent her leisure reading them.

One of the earliest recollections of Phyllis was the caution, "Don't tell father!" received on the hiding of a book. Mrs. Bing had bought, in those weak, pinching times of poverty, extravagant things for herself and the girl and gone in debt for them. Collectors had come at times to get their money with impatient demands.

The Bings were living in a city those days. Phyllis had been a witness of many interviews of the kind. All along the way of life, she had heard the oft-repeated injunction, "Don't tell father!" She came to regard men as creatures who were not to be told. When Phyllis got into a scrape

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

at school, on account of a little flirtation, and Mrs. Bing went to see about it, the two agreed on keeping the salient facts from father.

A dressmaker came after Phyllis arrived to get her ready for the party. The afternoon of the event, J. Patterson brought the young people of the best families of Hazelmead by special train to Bingville. The Crookers, the Witherills, the Ameses, the Renfrews and a number of the most popular students in the Normal School were also invited. They had the famous string band from Hazelmead to furnish music, and Smith—an impressive young English butler whom they had brought from New York on their last return.

Phyllis wore a gown which Judge Crooker described as "the limit." He said to his wife after they had gone home: "Why, there was nothing on her back but

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

a pair of velvet gallowses and when I stood in front of her my eyes were scared."

"Mrs. Bing calls it high art," said the Judge's wife.

"I call it down pretty close to see level," said the Judge. "When she clinched with those young fellers and went wrestling around the room she reminded me of a grape-vine growing on a tree."

This reaction on the intellect of the Judge quite satisfies the need of the historian. Again the Old Spirit of Bingville had received notice. It is only necessary to add that the punch was strong and the house party over the week-end made a good deal of talk by fast driving around the country in motor-cars on Sunday and by loud singing in boats on the river and noisy play on the tennis courts. That kind of thing was new to Bingville.

When it was all over, Phyllis told her mother that Gordon King—one of the young men—had insulted her when they

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

had been out in a boat together on Sunday. Mrs. Bing was shocked. They had a talk about it up in Phyllis' bedroom at the end of which Mrs. Bing repeated that familiar injunction, "Don't tell father!"

It was soon after the party that Mr. J. Patterson Bing sent for William Snodgrass, the carpenter. He wanted an extension built on his house containing new bedrooms and baths and a large sun parlor. The estimate of Snodgrass was unexpectedly large. In explanation of the fact the latter said: "We work only eight hours a day now. The men demand it and they must be taken to and from their work. They can get all they want to do on those terms."

"And they demand seven dollars and a half a day at that? It's big pay for an ordinary mechanic," said J. Patterson.

"There's plenty of work to do," Snodgrass answered. "I don't care the snap o' my finger whether I get your job or not.

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

I'm forty thousand ahead o' the game and I feel like layin' off for the summer and takin' a rest."

"I suppose I could get you to work overtime and hurry the job through if I'm willing to pay for it?" the millionaire inquired.

"The rate would be time an' a half for work done after the eight hours are up, but it's hard to get any one to work overtime these days."

"Well, go ahead and get all the work you can out of these plutocrats of the saw and hammer. I'll pay the bills," said J. Patterson.

The terms created a record in Bingville. But, as Mr. Bing had agreed to them, in his haste, they were established.

Israel Sneed, the plumber, was working with his men on a job at Millerton, but he took on the plumbing for the Bing house extension, at prices above all precedent, to be done as soon as he could get to it on

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

his return. The butcher and grocer had improved the opportunity to raise their prices for Bing never questioned a bill. He set the pace. Prices stuck where he put the peg. So, unwittingly, the millionaire had created conditions of life that were extremely difficult.

Since prices had gone up the village of Bingville had been running down at the heel. It had been at best and, in the main, a rather shiftless and inert community. The weather had worn the paint off many houses before their owners had seen the need of repainting. Not until the rain drummed on the floor was the average, drowsy intellect of Bingville roused to action on the roof. It must be said, however, that every one was busy, every day, except Hiram Blenkinsop, who often indulged in *ante mortem* slumbers in the graveyard or went out on the river with his dog Christmas, his bottle and his fishing rod.

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

The people were selling goods, or teaming, or working in the two hotels or the machine shop or the electric light plant or the mill, or keeping the hay off the lawns, or building, or teaching in the schools. The gardens were suffering unusual neglect that season—their owners being so profitably engaged in other work—and the lazy foreigners demanded four dollars and a half a day and had to be watched and sworn at and instructed, and not every one had the versatility for this task. The gardens were largely dependent on the spasmodic industry of schoolboys and old men. So it will be seen that the work of the community had little effect on the supply of things necessary to life. Indeed, a general habit of extravagance had been growing in the village. People were not so careful of food, fuel and clothing as they had been.

It was a wet summer in Bingville. The day after the rains began, Professor Ren-

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

frew called at the house of the sniffy Snodgrass—the nouveau riche and opulent carpenter. He sat reading the morning paper with a new diamond ring on the third finger of his left hand.

“My roof is leaking badly and it will have to be fixed at once,” the Professor announced.

“I’m sorry, I can’t do a thing for you now,” said Snodgrass. “I’ve got so much to do, I don’t know which way to turn.”

“But you’re not working this rainy day, are you?” the Professor asked.

“No, and I don’t propose to work in this rain for anybody; if I did I’d fix my own roof. To tell you the truth, I don’t have to work at all! I calculate that I’ve got all the money I need. So, when it rains, I intend to rest and get acquainted with my family.”

He was firm but in no way disagreeable about it.

Some of the half-dozen men who, in like

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

trouble, called on him for help that day were inclined to resent his declaration of independence and his devotion to leisure, but really Mr. Snodgrass was well within his rights.

It was a more serious matter when Judge Crooker's plumbing leaked and flooded his kitchen and cellar. Israel Sneed was in Millerton every day and working overtime more or less. He refused to put a hand on the Judge's pipes. He was sorry but he couldn't make a horse of himself and even if he could the time was past when he had to do it. Judge Crooker brought a plumber from Hazelmead, sixty miles in a motor-car, and had to pay seventy dollars for time, labor and materials. This mechanic declared that there was too much pressure on the pipes, a judgment of whose accuracy we have abundant proof in the history of the next week or so. Never had there been such a bursting of pipes and flooding of cellars. That little lake up in

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

the hills which supplied the water of Bingville seemed to have got the common notion of moving into the village. A dozen cellars were turned into swimming pools. Modern improvements were going out of commission. A committee went to Hazelmead and after a week's pleading got a pair of young and inexperienced plumbers to come to Bingville.

"They must 'a' plugged 'em with gold," said Deacon Hosley, when the bill arrived.

New leaks were forthcoming, but Hiram Blenkinsop conceived the notion of stopping them with poultices of white lead and bandages of canvas bound with fine wire. They dripped and many of the pipes of Bingville looked as if they were suffering from sprained ankles and sore throats, but Hiram had prevented another deluge.

The price of coal had driven the people of Bingville back to the woods for fuel. The old wood stoves had been cleaned and set up in the sitting-rooms and kitchens.

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

The saving had been considerable. Now, so many men were putting in their time on the house and grounds of J. Patterson Bing and the new factory at Millerton that the local wood dealer found it impossible to get the help he needed. Not twenty-five per cent. of the orders on his books could be filled.

Mr. Bing's house was finished in October. Then Snodgrass announced that he was going to take it easy as became a man of his opulence. He had bought a farm and would only work three days a week at his trade. Sneed had also bought a farm and acquired a feeling of opulence. He was going to work when he felt like it. Before he tackled any leaking pipes he proposed to make a few leaks in the deer up in the Adirondacks. So the roofs and the plumbing had to wait.

Meanwhile, Bingville was in sore trouble. The ancient roof of its respectability had begun to leak. The beams and rafters in

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

the house of its spirit were rotting away. Many of the inhabitants of the latter regarded the great J. Patterson Bing with a kind of awe—like that of the Shepherd of the Birds. He was the leading citizen. He had done things. When J. Patterson Bing decided that rest or fresh air was better for him than bad music and dull prayers and sermons, and that God was really not much concerned as to whether a man sat in a pew or a rocking chair or a motor-car on Sunday, he was, probably, quite right. Really, it was a matter much more important to Mr. Bing and his neighbors than to God. Indeed, it is not at all likely that the ruler of the universe was worrying much about them. But when J. Patterson Bing decided in favor of fun and fresh air, R. Purdy—druggist—made a like decision, and R. Purdy was a man of commanding influence in his own home. His daughters, Mabel and Gladys, and his son, Richard, Jr., would not have been sur-

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

prised to see him elected President of the United States, some day, believing that that honor was only for the truly great. Soon Mrs. Purdy stood alone—a hopeless minority of one—in the household. By much pleading and nagging, she kept the children in the fold of the church for a time but, by and by, grew weary of the effort. She was converted by nervous exhaustion to the picnic Sunday. Her conscience worried her. She really felt sorry for God and made sundry remarks calculated to appease and comfort Him.

Now all this would seem to have been in itself a matter of slight importance. But Orville Gates, the superintendent of the mill, and John Seaver, attorney at law, and Robert Brown, the grocer, and Pendleton Ames, who kept the book and stationery store, and William Ferguson, the clothier, and Darwin Sill, the butcher, and Snodgrass, the carpenter, and others had

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

joined the picnic caravan led by the millionaire. These good people would not have admitted it, but the truth is J. Patterson Bing held them all in the hollow of his hand. Nobody outside his own family had any affection for him. Outwardly, he was as hard as nails. But he owned the bank and controlled credits and was an extravagant buyer. He had given freely for the improvement of the village and the neighboring city of Hazelmead. His family was the court circle of Bингville. Consciously or unconsciously, the best people imitated the Bings.

Judge Crooker was, one day, discussing with a friend the social conditions of Bингville. In regard to picnic Sundays he made this remark: "George Meredith once wrote to his son that he would need the help of religion to get safely beyond the stormy passions of youth. It is very true!"

The historian was reminded of this say-

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

ing by the undertow of the life currents in Bingville. The dances in the Normal School and in the homes of the well-to-do were imitations of the great party at J. Patterson Bing's. The costumes of certain of the young ladies were, to quote a clause from the posters of the Messrs. Barnum and Bailey, still clinging to the bill-board: "the most daring and amazing bareback performances in the history of the circus ring." Phyllis Bing, the unrivaled metropolitan performer, set the pace. It was distinctly too rapid for her followers. If one may say it kindly, she was as cold and heartless and beautiful in her act as a piece of bronze or Italian marble. She was not ashamed of herself. She did it so easily and gracefully and unconsciously and obligingly, so to speak, as if her license had never been questioned. It was not so with Vivian Mead and Frances Smith and Pauline Baker. They limped and struggled in their efforts to keep up. To begin

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

with, the art of their modiste had been fussy, imitative and timid. It lacked the master touch. Their spirits were also improperly prepared for such publicity. They blushed and looked apologies and were visibly uncomfortable when they entered the dance-hall.

On this point, Judge Crooker delivered a famous opinion. It was: "I feel sorry for those girls but their mothers ought to be spanked!"

There is evidence that this sentence of his was carried out in due time and in a most effectual manner. But the works of art which these mothers had put on exhibition at the Normal School sprang into overwhelming popularity with the young men and their cards were quickly filled. In half an hour, they had ceased to blush. Their eyes no longer spoke apologies. They were new women. Their initiation was complete. They had become in the

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

language of Judge Crooker, "perfect Phyllistines!"

The dancing tried to be as naughty as that remarkable Phyllistinian pastime at the mansion of the Bings and succeeded well, if not handsomely. The modern dances and dress were now definitely established in Bingville.

Just before the holidays, the extension of the ample home of the millionaire was decorated, furnished, and ready to be shown. Mrs. Bing and Phyllis who had been having a fling in New York came home for the holidays. John arrived the next day from the great Padelford School to be with the family through the winter recess. Mrs. Bing gave a tea to the ladies of Bingville. She wanted them to see the improvements and become aware of her good will. She had thought of an evening party, but there were many men in the village whom she didn't care to have in her house. So it became a tea.

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

The women talked of leaking roofs and water pipes and useless bathrooms and outrageous costs. Phyllis sat in the Palm Room with the village girls. It happened that they talked mainly about their fathers. Some had complained of paternal strictness.

"Men are terrible! They make so much trouble," said Frances Smith. "It seems as if they hated to see anybody have a good time."

"Mother and I do as we please and say nothing," said Phyllis. "We never tell father anything. Men don't understand."

Some of the girls smiled and looked into one another's eyes.

There had been a curious undercurrent in the party. It did not break the surface of the stream until Mrs. Bing asked Mrs. Pendleton Ames, "Where is Susan Baker?"

A silence fell upon the group around her. Mrs. Ames leaned toward Mrs. Bing and

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

whispered, "Haven't you heard the news?"

"No. I had to scold Susan Crowder and Martha Featherstraw as soon as I got here for neglecting their work and they've hardly spoken to me since. What is it?"

"Pauline Baker has run away with a strange young man," Mrs. Ames whispered.

Mrs. Bing threw up both hands, opened her mouth and looked toward the ceiling.

"You don't mean it," she gasped.

"It's a fact. Susan told me. Mr. Baker doesn't know the truth yet and she doesn't dare to tell him. She's scared stiff. Pauline went over to Hazelmead last week to visit Emma Stacy against his wishes. She met the young man at a dance. Susan got a letter from Pauline last night making a clean breast of the matter. They are married and stopping at a hotel in New York."

"My lord! I should think she *would* be scared stiff," said Mrs. Bing.

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

"I think there is a good reason for the stiffness of Susan," said Mrs. Singleton, the wife of the Congregational minister. "We all know that Mr. Baker objected to these modern dances and the way that Pauline dressed. He used to say that it was walking on the edge of a precipice."

There was a breath of silence in which one could hear only a faint rustle like the stir of some invisible spirit.

Mrs. Bing sighed. "He may be all right," she said in a low, calm voice.

"But the indications are not favorable," Mrs. Singleton remarked.

The gossip ceased abruptly, for the girls were coming out of the Palm Room.

The next morning, Mrs. Bing went to see Susan Baker to offer sympathy and a helping hand. Mamie Bing was, after all, a good-hearted woman. By this time, Mr. Baker had been told. He had kicked a hole in the long looking-glass in Pauline's bedroom and flung a pot of rouge through

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

the window and scattered talcum powder all over the place and torn a new silk gown into rags and burnt it in the kitchen stove and left the house slamming the door behind him. Susan had gone to bed and he had probably gone to the club or somewhere. Perhaps he would commit suicide. Of all this, it is enough to say that for some hours there was abundant occupation for the tender sympathies of Mrs. J. Patterson Bing. Before she left, Mr. Baker had returned for luncheon and seemed to be quite calm and self-possessed when he greeted her in the hall below stairs.

On entering her home, about one o'clock, Mrs. Bing received a letter from the hand of Martha.

"Phyllis told me to give you this as soon as you returned," said the girl.

"What does this mean?" Mrs. Bing whispered to herself, as she tore open the envelope.

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

Her face grew pale and her hands trembled as she read the letter.

“*Dearest Mamma,*” it began. “I am going to Hazelmead for luncheon with Gordon King. I couldn’t ask you because I didn’t know where you were. We have waited an hour. I am sure you wouldn’t want me to miss having a lovely time. I shall be home before five. Don’t tell father! He hates Gordon so.

“*Phyllis.*”

“The boy who insulted her! My God!” Mrs. Bing exclaimed in a whisper. She hurried to the door of the butler’s pantry. Indignation was in the sound of her footsteps.

“Martha!” she called.

Martha came.

“Tell James to bring the big car at once. I’m going to Hazelmead.”

“Without luncheon?” the girl asked.

“Just give me a sandwich and I’ll eat it in my hand.”

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

"I want you to hurry," she said to James as she entered the glowing limousine with the sandwich half consumed.

They drove at top speed over the smooth, state road to the mill city. At half past two, Mrs. Bing alighted at the fashionable Gray Goose Inn where the best people had their luncheon parties. She found Phyllis and Gordon in a cozy alcove, sipping cognac and smoking cigarettes, with an ice tub and a champagne bottle beside them. To tell the whole truth, it was a timely arrival. Phyllis, with no notion of the peril of it, was indeed having "a lovely time"—the time of her young life, in fact. For half an hour, she had been hanging on the edge of the giddy precipice of elopement. She was within one sip of a decision to let go.

Mrs. Bing was admirably cool. In her manner there was little to indicate that she had seen the unusual and highly festive accessories. She sat down beside them

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

and said, "My dear, I was very lonely and thought I would come and look you up. Is your luncheon finished?"

"Yes," said Phyllis.

"Then let us go and get into the car. We'll drop Mr. King at his home."

When at last they were seated in the limousine, the angry lady lifted the brakes in a way of speaking.

"I am astonished that you would go to luncheon with this young man who has insulted you," she said.

Phyllis began to cry.

Turning to young Gordon King, the indignant lady added: "I think you are a disreputable boy. You must never come to my house again—*never!*"

He made no answer and left the car without a word at the door of the King residence.

There were miles and miles of weeping on the way home. Phyllis had recovered

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

her composure but began again when her mother remarked, "I wonder where you learned to drink champagne and cognac and smoke cigarettes," as if her own home had not been a perfect academy of dissipation. The girl sat in a corner, her eyes covered with her handkerchief and the only words she uttered on the way home were these: "Don't tell father!"

While this was happening, Mr. Baker confided his troubles to Judge Crooker in the latter's office. The Judge heard him through and then delivered another notable opinion, to wit: "There are many subjects on which the judgment of the average man is of little value, but in the matter of bringing up a daughter it is apt to be sound. Also there are many subjects on which the judgment of the average woman may be trusted, but in the matter of bringing up a daughter it is apt to be unsound. I say this, after some forty years of observation."

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

“What is the reason?” Mr. Baker asked.

“Well, a daughter has to be prepared to deal with men,” the Judge went on. “The masculine temperament is involved in all the critical problems of her life. Naturally the average man is pretty well informed on the subject of men. You have prospered these late years. You have been so busy getting rich that you have just used your home to eat and sleep in. You can’t do a home any good by eating and snoring and reading a paper in it.”

“My wife would have her own way there,” said Baker.

“That doesn’t alter the fact that you have neglected your home. You have let things slide. You wore yourself out in this matter of money-getting. You were tired when you got home at night—all in, as they say. The bank was the main thing with you. I repeat that you let things slide at home and the longer they slide the faster they slide when they’re going down

## 'THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

hill. You can always count on that in a case of sliding. The young have a taste for velocity and often it comes so unaccountably fast that they don't know what to do with it, so they're apt to get their necks broken unless there's some one to put on the brakes."

Mr. Emanuel Baker arose and began to stride up and down the room.

"Upon my word, Judge! I don't know what to do," he exclaimed.

"There's only one thing to do. Go and find the young people and give them your blessing. If you can discover a spark of manhood in the fellow, make the most of it. The chances are against that, but let us hope for the best. Above all, I want you to be gentle with Pauline. You are more to blame than she is."

"I don't see how I can spare the time, but I'll have to," said Baker.

"Time! Fiddlesticks!" the Judge exclaimed. "What a darn fool money makes

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

of a man! You have lost your sense of proportion, your appreciation of values. Bill Pritchard used to talk that way to me. He has been lying twenty years in his grave. He hadn't a minute to spare until one day he fell dead—then leisure and lots of leisure it would seem—and the business has doubled since he quit worrying about it. My friend, you can not take a cent into Paradise, but the soul of Pauline is a different kind of property. It might be a help to you there. Give plenty of time to this job, and good luck to you."

The spirit of the old, dead days spoke in the voice of the Judge—spoke with a kindly dignity. It had ever been the voice of Justice, tempered with Mercy—the most feared and respected voice in the upper counties. His grave, smooth-shaven face, his kindly gray eyes, his noble brow with its crown of white hair were fitting accessories of the throne of Justice and Mercy.

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

"I'll go this afternoon. Thank you, Judge!" said Baker, as he left the office.

Pauline had announced in her letter that her husband's name was Herbert Middleton. Mr. Baker sent a telegram to Pauline to apprise her of his arrival in the morning. It was a fatherly message of love and good-will. At the hotel in New York, Mr. Baker learned that Mr. and Mrs. Middleton had checked out the day before. Nobody could tell him where they had gone. One of the men at the porter's desk told of putting them in a taxicab with their grips and a steamer trunk soon after luncheon. He didn't know where they went. Mr. Baker's telegram was there unopened. He called at every hotel desk in the city, but he could get no trace of them. He telephoned to Mrs. Baker. She had heard nothing from Pauline. In despair, he went to the Police Department and told his story to the Chief.

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

"It looks as if there was something crooked about it," said the Chief. "There are many cases like this. Just read that."

The officer picked up a newspaper clipping, which lay on his desk, and passed it to Mr. Baker. It was from the *New York Evening Post*. The banker read aloud this startling information:

"The New York police report that approximately 3600 girls have run away or disappeared from their homes in the past eleven months, and the Bureau of Missing Persons estimates that the number who have disappeared throughout the country approximates 68,000.' "

"It's rather astonishing," the Chief went on. "The women seem to have gone crazy these days. Maybe it's the new dancing and the movies that are breaking down the morals of the little suburban towns or maybe it's the excitement of the war. Anyhow, they keep the city supplied

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

with runaways and vamps. You are not the first anxious father I have seen to-day. You can go home. I'll put a man on the case and let you know what happens."

## CHAPTER THREE

### WHICH TELLS OF THE COMPLAINING COIN AND THE MAN WHO LOST HIS SELF

THERE was a certain gold coin in a little bureau drawer in Bingville which began to form a habit of complaining to its master.

“How cold I am!” it seemed to say to the boy. “I was cold when you put me in here and I have been cold ever since. Br-r-r! I’m freezing.”

Bob Moran took out the little drawer and gave it a shaking as he looked down at the gold piece.

“Don’t get rattled,” said the redoubt-able Mr. Bloggs, who had a great contempt for cowards.

It was just after the Shepherd of the

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

Birds had heard of a poor widow who was the mother of two small children and who had fallen sick of the influenza with no fuel in her house.

“I am cold, too!” said the Shepherd.

“Why, of course you are,” the coin answered. “That’s the reason I’m cold. A coin is never any warmer than the heart of its owner. Why don’t you take me out of here and give me a chance to move around?”

Things that would not say a word to other boys often spoke to the Shepherd.

“Let him go,” said Mr. Bloggs.

Indeed it was the tin soldier, who stood on his little shelf looking out of the window, who first reminded Bob of the loneliness and discomfort of the coin. As a rule whenever the conscience of the boy was touched Mr. Bloggs had something to say.

It was late in February and every one was complaining of the cold. Even the oldest inhabitants of Bingville could not

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

recall so severe a winter. Many families were short of fuel. The homes of the working folk were insufficiently heated. Money in the bank had given them a sense of security. They could not believe that its magic power would fail to bring them what they needed. So they had been careless of their allowance of wood and coal. There were days when they had none and could get none at the yard. Some of them took boards out of their barn floors and cut down shade trees and broke up the worst of their furniture to feed the kitchen stove in those days of famine. Some men with hundreds of dollars in the bank went out into the country at night and stole rails off the farmers' fences. The homes of these unfortunate people were ravaged by influenza and many died.

Prices at the stores mounted higher. Most of the gardens had been lying idle. The farmers had found it hard to get help. Some of the latter, indeed, had decided

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

that they could make more by teaming at Millerton than by toiling in the fields, and with less effort. They left the boys and the women to do what they could with the crops. Naturally the latter were small. So the local sources of supply had little to offer and the demand upon the stores steadily increased. Certain of the merchants had been, in a way, spoiled by prosperity. They were rather indifferent to complaints and demands. Many of the storekeepers, irritated, doubtless, by over-work, had lost their former politeness. The two butchers, having prospered beyond their hopes, began to feel the need of rest. They cut down their hours of labor and reduced their stocks and raised their prices. There were days when their supplies failed to arrive. The railroad service had been bad enough in times of peace. Now, it was worse than ever.

Those who had plenty of money found

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

it difficult to get a sufficient quantity of good food, Bingville being rather cut off from other centers of life by distance and a poor railroad. Some drove sixty miles to Hazelmead to do marketing for themselves and their neighbors.

Mr. and Mrs. J. Patterson Bing, however, in their luxurious apartment at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York, knew little of these conditions until Mr. Bing came up late in March for a talk with the mill superintendent. Many of the sick and poor suffered extreme privation. Father O'Neil and the Reverend Otis Singleton of the Congregational Church went among the people, ministering to the sick, of whom there were very many, and giving counsel to men and women who were unaccustomed to prosperity and ill-qualified wisely to enjoy it. One day, Father O'Neil saw the Widow Moran coming into town with a great bundle of fagots on her back.

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

"This looks a little like the old country," he remarked.

She stopped and swung her fagots to the ground and announced: "It do that an' may God help us! It's hard times, Father. In spite o' all the money, it's hard times. It looks like there wasn't enough to go 'round—the ships be takin' so many things to the old country."

"How is my beloved Shepherd?" the good Father asked.

"Mother o' God! The house is that cold, he's been layin' abed for a week an' Judge Crooker has been away on the circuit."

"Too bad!" said the priest. "I've been so busy with the sick and the dying and the dead I have hardly had time to think of you."

Against her protest, he picked up the fagots and carried them on his own back to her kitchen.

He found the Shepherd in a sweater sitting up in bed and knitting socks.

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

“How is my dear boy?” the good Father asked.

“Very sad,” said the Shepherd. “I want to do something to help and my legs are useless.”

“Courage!” Mr. Bloggs seemed to shout from his shelf at the window-side and just then he assumed a most valiant and determined look as he added: “Forward! march!”

Father O’Neil did what he could to help in that moment of peril by saying:

“Cheer up, boy. I’m going out to Dan Mullin’s this afternoon and I’ll make him bring you a big load of wood. I’ll have you back at your work to-morrow. The spring will be coming soon and your flock will be back in the garden.”

It was not easy to bring a smile to the face of the little Shepherd those days. A number of his friends had died and others were sick and he was helpless. Moreover,

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

his mother had told him of the disappearance of Pauline and that her parents feared she was in great trouble. This had worried him, and the more because his mother had declared that the girl was probably worse than dead. He could not quite understand it and his happy spirit was clouded. The good Father cheered him with merry jests. Near the end of their talk the boy said: "There's one thing in this room that makes me unhappy. It's that gold piece in the drawer. It does nothing but lie there and shiver and talk to me. Seems as if it complained of the cold. It says that it wants to move around and get warm. Every time I hear of some poor person that needs food or fuel, it calls out to me there in the little drawer and says, 'How cold I am! How cold I am!' My mother wishes me to keep it for some time of trouble that may come to us, but I can't. It makes me unhappy. Please take it away and let it

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

do what it can to keep the poor people warm.”

“Well done, boys!” Mr. Bloggs seemed to say with a look of joy as if he now perceived that the enemy was in full retreat.

“There’s no worse company, these days, than a hoarded coin,” said the priest. “I won’t let it plague you any more.”

Father O’Neil took the coin from the drawer. It fell from his fingers with a merry laugh as it bounded on the floor and whirled toward the doorway like one overjoyed and eager to be off.

“God bless you, my boy! May it buy for you the dearest wish of your heart.”

“Ha ha!” laughed the little tin soldier for he knew the dearest wish of the boy far better than the priest knew it.

Mr. Singleton called soon after Father O’Neil had gone away.

“The top of the morning to you!” he shouted, as he came into Bob’s room.

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

“It’s all right top and bottom,” Bob answered cheerfully.

“Is there anything I can do for you?” the minister went on. “I’m a regular Santa Claus this morning. I’ve got a thousand dollars that Mr. Bing sent me. It’s for any one that needs help.”

“We’ll be all right as soon as our load of wood comes. It will be here to-morrow morning,” said the Shepherd.

“I’ll come and cut and split it for you,” the minister proposed. “The eloquence of the axe is better than that of the tongue these days. Meanwhile, I’m going to bring you a little jag in my wheelbarrow. How about beefsteak and bacon and eggs and all that?”

“I guess we’ve got enough to eat, thank you.” This was not quite true, for Bob, thinking of the sick, whose people could not go to market, was inclined to hide his own hunger.

“Ho, ho!” exclaimed Mr. Bloggs, for

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

he knew very well that the boy was hiding his hunger.

“Do you call that a lie?” the Shepherd asked as soon as the minister had gone.

“A little one! But in my opinion it don’t count,” said Mr. Bloggs. “You were thinking of those who need food more than you and that turns it square around. I call it a golden lie—I do.”

The minister had scarcely turned the corner of the street, when he met Hiram Blenkinsop, who was shivering along without an overcoat, the dog Christmas at his heels.

Mr. Singleton stopped him.

“Why, man! Haven’t you an overcoat?” he asked.

“No, sir! It’s hangin’ on a peg in a pawn-shop over in Hazelmead. It ain’t doin’ the peg any good nor me neither!”

“Well, sir, you come with me,” said the minister. “It’s about dinner time, anyway, and I guess you need lining as well as covering.”

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

The drunkard looked into the face of the minister.

“Say it ag’in,” he muttered.

“I wouldn’t wonder if a little food would make you feel better,” Mr. Singleton added.

“A little, did ye say?” Blenkinsop asked.

“Make it a lot—as much as you can accommodate.”

“And do ye mean that ye want me to go an’ eat in yer house?”

“Yes, at my table—why not?”

“It wouldn’t be respectable. I don’t want to be too particular but a tramp must draw the line somewhere.”

“I’ll be on my best behavior. Come on,” said the minister.

The two men hastened up the street followed by the dejected little yellow dog, Christmas.

Mrs. Singleton and her daughter were out with a committee of the Children’s

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

Helpers and the minister was dining alone that day and, as usual, at one o'clock, that being the hour for dinner in the village of Bingville.

"Tell me about yourself," said the minister as they sat down at the table.

"Myself—did you say?" Hiram Blenkinsop asked as one of his feet crept under his chair to conceal its disreputable appearance, while his dog had partly hidden himself under a serving table where he seemed to be shivering with apprehension as he peered out, with raised hackles, at the stag's head over the mantel.

"Yes."

"I ain't got any *Self*, sir; it's all gone," said Blenkinsop, as he took a swallow of water.

"A man without any *Self* is a curious creature," the minister remarked.

"I'm as empty as a woodpecker's hole in the winter time. The bird has flown. I belong to this 'ere dog. He's a

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

poor dog. I'm all he's got. If he had to pay a license on me I'd have to be killed. He's kind to me. He's the only friend I've got."

Hiram Blenkinsop riveted his attention upon an old warming-pan that hung by the fireplace. He hardly looked at the face of the minister.

"How did you come to lose your Self?" the latter asked.

"Married a bad woman and took to drink. A man's Self can stand cold an' hunger an' shipwreck an' loss o' friends an' money an' any quantity o' bad luck, take it as it comes, but a bad woman breaks the works in him an' stops his clock dead. Leastways, it done that to me!"

"She is like an arrow in his liver," the minister quoted. "Mr. Blenkinsop, where do you stay nights?"

"I've a shake-down in the little loft over the ol' blacksmith shop on Water

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

Street. There are cracks in the gable, an' the snow an' the wind blows in, an' the place is dark an' smells o' coal gas an' horses' feet, but Christmas an' I snug up together an' manage to live through the winter. In hot weather, we sleep under a tree in the ol' graveyard an' study astronomy. Sometimes, I wish I was there for good."

"Wouldn't you like a bed in a comfortable house?"

"No. I couldn't take the dog there an' I'd have to git up like other folks."

"Would you think that a hardship?"

"Well, ye see, sir, if ye're layin' down ye ain't hungry. Then, too, I likes to dilly-dally in bed."

"What may that mean?" the minister asked.

"I likes to lay an' think an' build air castles."

"What kind of castles?"

"Well, sir, I'm thinkin' often o' a time

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

when I'll have a grand suit o' clothes, an' a shiny silk tile on my head, an' a roll o' bills in my pocket, big enough to choke a dog, an' I'll be goin' back to the town where I was brought up an' I'll hire a fine team an' take my ol' mother out for a ride. An' when we pass by, people will be sayin': 'That's Hiram Blenkinsop! Don't you remember him? Born on the top floor o' the ol' sash mill on the island. He's a multi-millionaire an' a great man. He gives a thousand to the poor every day. Sure, he does!"'

"Blenkinsop, I'd like to help you to recover your lost Self and be a useful and respected citizen of this town," said Mr. Singleton. "You can do it if you will and I can tell you how."

Tears began to stream down the cheeks of the unfortunate man, who now covered his eyes with a big, rough hand.

"If you will make an honest effort, I'll stand by you. I'll be your friend through

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

thick and thin," the minister added. "There's something good in you or you wouldn't be having a dream like that."

"Nobody has ever talked to me this way," poor Blenkinsop sobbed. "Nobody but you has ever treated me as if I was human."

"I know—I know. It's a hard old world, but at last you've found a man who is willing to be a brother to you if you really want one."

The poor man rose from the table and went to the minister's side and held out his hand.

"I do want a brother, sir, an' I'll do anything at all," he said in a broken voice.

"Then come with me," the minister commanded. "First, I'm going to improve the outside of you."

When they were ready to leave the house, Blenkinsop and his dog had had a bath and the former was shaved and in

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

clean and respectable garments from top to toe.

"You look like a new man," said Mr. Singleton.

"Seems like, I felt more like a proper human bein'," Blenkinsop answered.

Christmas was scampering up and down the hall as if he felt like a new dog. Suddenly he discovered the stag's head again and slunk into a dark corner growling.

"A bath is a good sort of baptism," the minister remarked. "Here's an overcoat that I haven't worn for a year. It's fairly warm, too. Now if your Old Self should happen to come in sight of you, maybe he'd move back into his home. I remember once that we had a canary bird that got away. We hung his cage in one of the trees out in the yard with some food in it. By and by, we found him singing on the perch in his little home. Now, if we put some good food in the cage, maybe your

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

bird will come back. Our work has only just begun."

They went out of the door and crossed the street and entered the big stone Congregational Church and sat down together in a pew. A soft light came through the great jeweled windows above the altar, and in the clearstory, and over the organ loft. They were the gift of Mr. Bing. It was a quiet, restful, beautiful place.

"I used to stand in the pulpit there and look down upon a crowd of handsomely dressed people," said Mr. Singleton in a low voice. "'There is something wrong about this,' I thought. 'There's too much respectability here. There are no flannel shirts and gingham dresses in the place. I can not see half a dozen poor people. I wish there was some ragged clothing down there in the pews. There isn't an out-and-out sinner in the crowd. Have we set up a little private god of our own that cares

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

only for the rich and respectable?" I asked myself. "This is the place for Hiram Blenkinsop and old Bill Lang and poor Lizzie Quesnelle, if they only knew it. Those are the kind of people that Jesus cared most about." They're beginning to come to us now and we are glad of it. I want to see you here every Sunday after this. I want you to think of this place as your home. If you really wish to be my brother, come with me."

Blenkinsop trembled with strange excitement as he went with Mr. Singleton down the broad aisle, the dog Christmas following meekly. Man and minister knelt before the altar. Christmas sat down by his master's side, in a prayerful attitude, as if he, too, were seeking help and forgiveness.

"I feel better inside an' outside," said Blenkinsop as they were leaving the church.

"When you are tempted, there are three

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

words which may be useful to you. They are these, ‘God help me,’ ” the minister told him. “They are quickly said and I have often found them a source of strength in time of trouble. I am going to find work for you and there’s a room over my garage with a stove in it which will make a very snug little home for you and Christmas.”

That evening, as the dog and his master were sitting comfortably by the stove in their new home, there came a rap at the door. In a moment, Judge Crooker entered the room.

“Mr. Blenkinsop,” said the Judge as he held out his hand, “I have heard of your new plans and I want you to know that I am very glad. Every one will be glad.”

When the Judge had gone, Blenkinsop put his hand on the dog’s head and asked with a little laugh: “Did ye hear what he

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

said, Christmas? He called me *Mister*. Never done that before, no sir!"

Mr. Blenkinsop sat with his head upon his hand listening to the wind that whistled mournfully in the chimney. Suddenly he shouted: "Come in!"

The door opened and there on the threshold stood his Old Self.

It was not at all the kind of a Self one would have expected to see. It was, indeed, a very youthful and handsome Self—the figure of a clear-eyed, gentle-faced boy of about sixteen with curly, dark hair above his brows.

Mr. Blenkinsop covered his face and groaned. Then he held out his hands with an imploring gesture.

"I know you," he whispered. "Please come in."

"Not yet," the young man answered, and his voice was like the wind in the chimney. "But I have come to tell you that I, too, am glad."

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

Then he vanished.

Mr. Blenkinsop arose from his chair and rubbed his eyes.

“Christmas, ol’ boy, I’ve been asleep,” he muttered. “I guess it’s time we turned in!”

## CHAPTER FOUR

### IN WHICH MR. ISRAEL SNEED AND OTHER WORKING MEN RECEIVE A LESSON IN TRUE DEMOCRACY

NEXT morning, Mr. Blenkinsop went to cut wood for the Widow Moran. The good woman was amazed by his highly respectable appearance.

"God help us! Ye look like a lawyer," she said.

"I'm a new man! Cut out the blacksmith shop an' the booze an' the bummers."

"May the good God 'ove an' help ye! I heard about it."

"Ye did?"

"Sure I did. It's all over the town. Good news has a lively foot, man. The Shepherd clapped his hands when I told

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

him. Ye got to go straight, my laddie buck. All eyes are on ye now. Come up an' see the boy. It's his birthday!"

Mr. Blenkinsop was deeply moved by the greeting of the little Shepherd, who kissed his cheek and said that he had often prayed for him.

"If you ever get lonely, come and sit with me and we'll have a talk and a game of dominoes," said the boy.

Mr. Blenkinsop got strength out of the wonderful spirit of Bob Moran and as he swung his axe that day, he was happier than he had been in many years. Men and women who passed in the street said, "How do you do, Mr. Blenkinsop? I'm glad to see you."

Even the dog Christmas watched his master with a look of pride and approval. Now and then, he barked gleefully and scampered up and down the sidewalk.

The Shepherd was fourteen years old. On his birthday, from morning until night,

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

people came to his room bringing little gifts to remind him of their affection. No one in the village of Bingville was so much beloved. Judge Crooker came in the evening with ice-cream and a frosted cake. While he was there, a committee of citizens sought him out to confer with him regarding conditions in Bingville.

“There’s more money than ever in the place, but there never was so much misery,” said the chairman of the committee.

“We have learned that money is not the thing that makes happiness,” Judge Crooker began. “With every one busy at high wages, and the banks overflowing with deposits, we felt safe. We ceased to produce the necessities of life in a sufficient quantity. We forgot that the all important things are food, fuel, clothes and comfortable housing—not money. Some of us went money mad. With a feeling of opulence we refused to work at all, save when we felt like it. We bought diamond rings

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

and sat by the fire looking at them. The roofs began to leak and our plumbing went wrong. People going to buy meat found the shops closed. Roofs that might have been saved by timely repairs will have to be largely replaced. Plumbing systems have been ruined by neglect. With all its money, the town was never so poverty-stricken, the people never so wretched.”

Mr. Sneed, who was a member of the committee, slyly turned the ring on his finger so that the diamond was concealed. He cleared his throat and remarked, “We mechanics had more than we could do on work already contracted.”

“Yes, you worked eight hours a day and refused to work any longer. You were legally within your rights, but your position was ungrateful and even heartless and immoral. Suppose there were a baby coming at your house and you should call for the doctor and he should say, ‘I’m sorry, but I have done my eight hours’

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

work to-day and I can't help you.' Then suppose you should offer him a double fee and he should say, 'No, thanks, I'm tired. I've got forty thousand dollars in the bank and I don't have to work when I don't want to.'

"Or suppose I were trying a case for you and, when my eight hours' work had expired, I should walk out of the court and leave your case to take care of itself. What do you suppose would become of it? Yet that is exactly what you did to my pipes. You left them to take care of themselves. You men, who use your hands, make a great mistake in thinking that you are the workers of the country and that the rest of us are your natural enemies. In America, we are all workers! The idle man is a mere parasite and not at heart an American. Generally, I work fifteen hours a day.

"This little lad has been knitting night and day for the soldiers without

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

hope of reward and has spent his savings for yarn. There isn't a doctor in Bingville who isn't working eighteen hours a day. I met a minister this afternoon who hasn't had ten hours of sleep in a week—he's been so busy with the sick, and the dying and the dead. He is a nurse, a friend, a comforter to any one who needs him. No charge for overtime. My God! Are we all going money mad? Are you any better than he is, or I am, or than these doctors are who have been killing themselves with overwork? Do you dare to tell me that prosperity is any excuse for idleness in this land of ours, if one's help is needed?"

Judge Crooker's voice had been calm, his manner dignified. But the last sentences had been spoken with a quiet sternness and with his long, bony forefinger pointing straight at Mr. Sneed. The other members of the committee clapped their hands in hearty approval. Mr. Sneed smiled and brushed his trousers.

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

"I guess you're right," he said.  
"We're all off our balance a little, but  
what is to be done now?"

"We must quit our plumbing and carpentering and lawyering and banking and some of us must quit merchandising and sitting in the chimney corner and grab our saws and axes and go out into the woods and make some fuel and get it hauled into town," said Judge Crooker. "I'll be one of a party to go to-morrow with my axe. I haven't forgotten how to chop."

The committee thought this a good suggestion. They all rose and started on a search for volunteers, except Mr. Sneed. He tarried saying to the Judge that he wished to consult him on a private matter. It was, indeed, just then, a matter which could not have been more public although, so far, the news of it had traveled in whispers. The Judge had learned the facts since his return.

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

“I hope your plumbing hasn’t gone wrong,” he remarked with a smile.

“No, it’s worse than that,” said Mr. Sneed ruefully.

They bade the little Shepherd good night and went down-stairs where the widow was still at work with her washing, although it was nine o’clock.

“Faithful woman!” the Judge exclaimed as they went out on the street. “What would the world do without people like that? No extra charge for overtime either.”

Then, as they walked along, he cunningly paved the way for what he knew was coming.

“Did you notice the face of that boy?” he asked.

“Yes, it’s a wonderful face,” said Israel Sneed.

“It’s a God’s blessing to see a face like that,” the Judge went on. “Only the pure in heart can have it. The old spirit of

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

youth looks out of his eyes—the spirit of my own youth. When I was fourteen, I think that my heart was as pure as his. So were the hearts of most of the boys I knew."

"It isn't so now," said Mr. Sneed.

"I fear it isn't," the Judge answered. "There's a new look in the faces of the young. Every variety of evil is spread before them on the stage of our little theater. They see it while their characters are in the making, while their minds are like white wax. Everything that touches them leaves a mark or a smirch. It addresses them in the one language they all understand, and for which no dictionary is needed—pictures. The flower of youth fades fast enough, God knows, without the withering knowledge of evil. They say it's good for the boys and girls to know all about life. We shall see!"

Mr. Sneed sat down with Judge Crooker

AUGUSTA, SAVANNAH  
Library

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

in the handsome library of the latter and opened his heart. His son Richard, a boy of fifteen, and three other lads of the village, had been committing small burglaries and storing their booty in a cave in a piece of woods on the river bank near the village. A constable had secured a confession and recovered a part of the booty. Enough had been found to warrant a charge of grand larceny and Elisha Potts, whose store had been entered, was clamoring for the arrest of the boys.

"It reminds me of that picture of the Robbers' Cave that was on the billboard of our school of crime a few weeks ago," said the Judge. "I'm tired enough to lie down, but I'll go and see Elisha Potts. If he's abed, he'll have to get up, that's all. There's no telling what Potts has done or may do. Your plumbing is in bad shape, Mr. Snead. The public sewer is backing into your cellar and in a case of that kind the less delay the better."

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

He went into the hall and put on his coat and gloves and took his cane out of the rack. He was sixty-five years of age that winter. It was a bitter night when even younger men found it a trial to leave the comfort of the fireside. Sneed followed in silence. Indeed, his tongue was shame-bound. For a moment, he knew not what to say.

"I—I'm much o-oblige to you," he stammered as they went out into the cold wind. "I—I don't care what it costs, either."

The Judge stopped and turned toward him.

"Look here," he said. "Money does not enter into this proceeding or any motive but the will to help a neighbor. In such a matter overtime doesn't count."

They walked in silence to the corner. There Sneed pressed the Judge's hand and tried to say something, but his voice failed him.

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

“Have the boys at my office at ten o’clock to-morrow morning. I want to talk to them,” said the kindly old Judge as he strode away in the darkness.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### IN WHICH J. PATTERSON BING BUYS A NECKLACE OF PEARLS

MEANWHILE, the Bings had been having a busy winter in New York. J. Patterson Bing had been elected to the board of a large bank in Wall Street. His fortune had more than doubled in the last two years and he was now a considerable factor in finance.

Mrs. Bing had been studying current events and French and the English accent and other social graces every morning, with the best tutors, as she reclined comfortably in her bedchamber while Phyllis went to sundry shops. Mrs. Crooker had once said, "Mamie Bing has a passion for self-improvement." It was mainly if not quite true.

Phyllis had been "beating the bush"

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

with her mother at teas and dinners and dances and theaters and country house parties in and about the city. The speedometer on the limousine had doubled its mileage since they came to town. They were, it would seem, a tireless pair of hunters. Phyllis's portrait had appeared in the Sunday papers. It showed a face and form of unusual beauty. The supple grace and classic outlines of the latter were touchingly displayed at the dances in many a handsome ballroom. At last, they had found a promising and most eligible candidate in Roger Delane—a handsome stalwart youth, a year out of college. His father was a well-known and highly successful merchant of an old family which, for generations, had "belonged"—that is to say, it had been a part of the aristocracy of Fifth Avenue.

There could be no doubt of this great good luck of theirs—better, indeed, than Mrs. Bing had dared to hope for—the

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

young man having seriously confided his intentions to J. Patterson. But there was one shadow on the glowing prospect; Phyllis had suddenly taken a bad turn. She moped, as her mother put it. She was listless and unhappy. She had lost her interest in the chase, so to speak. She had little heart for teas and dances and dinner parties. One day, her mother returned from a luncheon and found her weeping. Mrs. Bing went at once to the telephone and called for the stomach specialist. He came and made a brief examination and said that it was all due to rich food and late hours. He left some medicine, advised a day or two of rest in bed, charged a hundred dollars and went away. They tried the remedies, but Phyllis showed no improvement. The young man sent American Beauty roses and a graceful note of regret to her room.

“You ought to be very happy,” said her mother. “He is a dear.”

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

"I know it," Phyllis answered. "He's just the most adorable creature I ever saw in my life."

"For goodness' sake! What is the matter of you? Why don't you brace up?" Mrs. Bing asked with a note of impatience in her tone. "You act like a dead fish."

Phyllis, who had been lying on the couch, rose to a sitting posture and flung one of the cushions at her mother, and rather swiftly.

"How can I brace up?" she asked with indignation in her eyes. "Don't *you* dare to scold me."

There was a breath of silence in which the two looked into each other's eyes. Many thoughts came flashing into the mind of Mrs. Bing. Why had the girl spoken the word "you" so bitterly? Little echoes of old history began to fill the silence. She arose and picked up the cushion and threw it on the sofa.

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

"What a temper!" she exclaimed. "Young lady, you don't seem to know that these days are very precious for you. They will not come again."

Then, in the old fashion of women who have suddenly come out of a moment of affectionate anger, they fell to weeping in each other's arms. The storm was over when they heard the feet of J. Patterson Bing in the hall. Phyllis fled into the bathroom.

"Hello!" said Mr. Bing as he entered the door. "I've found out what's the matter with Phyllis. It's nerves. I met the great specialist, John Hamilton Gibbs, at luncheon to-day. I described the symptoms. He says it's undoubtedly nerves. He has any number of cases just like this one—rest, fresh air and a careful diet are all that's needed. He says that if he can have her for two weeks, he'll guarantee a cure. I've agreed to have you take her to his sanitarium in the Catskills to-morrow. He

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

has saddle horses, sleeping balconies, toboggan slides, snow-shoe and skating parties and all that."

"I think it will be great," said Phyllis, who suddenly emerged from her hiding-place and embraced her father. "I'd love it! I'm sick of this old town. I'm sure it's just what I need."

"I couldn't go to-morrow," said Mrs. Bing. "I simply must go to Mrs. Delane's luncheon."

"Then I'll ask Harriet to go up with her," said J. Patterson.

Harriet, who lived in a flat on the upper west side, was Mr. Bing's sister.

Phyllis went to bed dinnerless with a headache. Mr. and Mrs. Bing sat for a long time over their coffee and cigarettes.

"It's something too dreadful that Phyllis should be getting sick just at the wrong time," said the madame. "She has always been well. I can't understand it."

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

“She’s had a rather strenuous time here,” said J. Patterson.

“But she seemed to enjoy it until—until the right man came along. The very man I hoped would like her! Then, suddenly, she throws up her hands and keels over. It’s too devilish for words.”

Mr. Bing laughed at his wife’s exasperation.

“To me, it’s no laughing matter,” said she with a serious face.

“Perhaps she doesn’t like the boy,” J. Patterson remarked.

Mrs. Bing leaned toward him and whispered: “She adores him!” She held her attitude and looked searchingly into her husband’s face.

“Well, you can’t say I did it,” he answered. “The modern girl is a rather delicate piece of machinery. I think she’ll be all right in a week or two. Come, it’s time we went to the theater if we’re going.”

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

Nothing more was said of the matter. Next morning immediately after breakfast, "Aunt Harriet" set out with Phyllis in the big limousine for Doctor Gibbs' sanitarium.

Phyllis found the remedy she needed in the ceaseless round of outdoor frolic. Her spirit washed in the glowing air found refreshment in the sleep that follows weariness and good digestion. Her health improved so visibly that her stay was far prolonged. It was the first week of May when Mrs. Bing drove up to get her. The girl was in perfect condition, it would seem. No rustic maid, in all the mountain valleys, had lighter feet or clearer eyes or a more honest, ruddy tan in her face due to the touch of the clean wind. She had grown as lithe and strong as a young panther.

They were going back to Bingville next day. Martha and Susan had been getting

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

the house ready. Mrs. Bing had been preparing what she fondly hoped would be "a lovely surprise" for Phyllis. Roger Delane was coming up to spend a quiet week with the Bings—a week of opportunity for the young people with saddle horses and a new steam launch and a Peterborough canoe and all pleasant accessories. Then, on the twentieth, which was the birthday of Phyllis, there was to be a dinner and a house party and possibly an announcement and a pretty wagging of tongues. Indeed, J. Patterson had already bought the wedding gift, a necklace of pearls, and paid a hundred thousand dollars for it and put it away in his safe. The necklace had pleased him. He had seen many jewels, but nothing so satisfying—nothing that so well expressed his affection for his daughter. He might never see its like again. So he bought it against the happy day which he hoped was near. He had shown it to his wife and charged her to make no mention

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

of it until "the time was ripe," in his way of speaking.

Mrs. Bing had promised on her word and honor to respect the confidence of her husband, with all righteous intention, but on the very day of their arrival in Bingville, Sophronia (Mrs. Pendleton) Ames called. Sophronia was the oldest and dearest friend that Mamie Bing had in the village. The latter enjoyed her life in New York, but she felt always a thrill at coming back to her big garden and the green trees and the ample spaces of Bingville, and to the ready, sympathetic confidence of Sophronia Ames. She told Sophronia of brilliant scenes in the changing spectacle of metropolitan life, of the wonderful young man and the untimely affliction of Phyllis, now happily past. Then, in a whisper, while Sophronia held up her right hand as a pledge of secrecy, she told of the necklace of which the lucky girl had no knowledge. Now Mrs. Ames was one of

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

the best of women. People were wont to speak of her, and rightly, as "the salt of the earth." She would do anything possible for a friend. But Mamie Bing had asked too much. Moreover, always it had been understood between them that these half playful oaths were not to be taken too seriously. Of course, "the fish had to be fed," as Judge Crooker had once put it. By "the fish," he meant that curious under-life of the village—the voracious, silent, merciless, cold-blooded thing which fed on the sins and follies of men and women and which rarely came to the surface to bother any one.

"The fish are very wise," Judge Crooker used to say. "They know the truth about every one and it's well that they do. After all, they perform an important office. There's many a man and woman who think they've been fooling the fish but they've only fooled themselves."

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

'And within a day or two, the secrets of the Bing family were swimming up and down the stream of the under-life of Bing-ville.

Mr. Bing had found a situation in the plant which was new to him. The men were discontented. Their wages were "sky high," to quote a phrase of one of the foremen. Still, they were not satisfied. Reports of the fabulous earnings of the mill had spread among them. They had begun to think that they were not getting a fair division of the proceeds of their labor. At a meeting of the help, a radical speaker had declared that one of the Bing women wore a noose of pearls on her neck worth half a million dollars. The men wanted more pay and less work. A committee of their leaders had called at Mr. Bing's office with a demand soon after his arrival. Mr. Bing had said "no" with a bang of his fist on the table. A worker's

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

meeting was to be held a week later to act upon the report of the committee.

Meanwhile, another cause of worry had come or rather returned to him. Again, Phyllis had begun to show symptoms of the old trouble. Mrs. Bing, arriving at dusk from a market trip to Hazelmead with Sophronia Ames, had found Phyllis lying asleep among the cushions on the great couch in the latter's bedroom. She entered the room softly and leaned over the girl and looked into her face, now turned toward the open window and lighted by the fading glow in the western sky and relaxed by sleep. It was a sad face! There were lines and shadows in it which the anxious mother had not seen before and—had she been crying? Very softly, the woman sat down at the girl's side. Darkness fell. Black, menacing shadows filled the corners of the room. The spirit of the girl betrayed its trouble in a sorrowful groan as she slept. Roger

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

Delane was coming next day. There was every reason why Phyllis should be happy. Silently, Mrs. Bing left the room. She met Martha in the hall.

"I shall want no dinner and Mr. Bing is dining in Hazelmead," she whispered. "Miss Phyllis is asleep. Don't disturb her."

Then she sat down in the darkness of her own bedroom alone.

## CHAPTER SIX

### IN WHICH HIRAM BLENKINSOP HAS A NUMBER OF ADVENTURES

THE Shepherd of the Birds had caught the plague of influenza in March and nearly lost his life with it. Judge Crooker and Mr. and Mrs. Singleton and their daughter and Father O'Neil and Mrs. Ames and Hiram Blenkinsop had taken turns in the nursing of the boy. He had come out of it with impaired vitality.

The rubber tree used to speak to him in those days of his depression and say, "It will be summer soon."

"Oh dear! But the days pass so slowly," Bob would answer with a sigh.

Then the round nickel clock would say cheerfully, "I hurry them along as fast as ever I can."

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

"Seems as if old Time was losing the use of his legs," said the Shepherd. "I wouldn't wonder if some one had run over him with an automobile."

"Everybody is trying to kill Time these days," ticked the clock with a merry chuckle.

Bob looked at the clock and laughed.  
"You've got some sense," he declared.

"Nonsense!" the clock answered.

"You can talk pretty well," said the boy.

"I can run too. If I couldn't, nobody would look at me."

"The more I look at you the more I think of Pauline. It's a long time since she went away," said the Shepherd. "We must all pray for her."

"Not I," said the little pine bureau. "Do you see that long scratch on my side? She did it with a hat pin when I belonged to her mother, and she used to keep her dolls in my lower drawer."

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

Mr. Bloggs assumed a look of great alertness as if he spied the enemy. "What's the use of worrying?" he quoted.

"You'd better lie down and cover yourself up or you'll never live to see her or the summer either," the clock warned the Shepherd.

Then Bob would lie down quickly and draw the clothes over his shoulders and sing of the Good King Wenceslas and The First Noël which Miss Betsy Singleton had taught him at Christmas time.

All this is important only as showing how a poor lad, of a lively imagination, was wont to spend his lonely hours. He needed company and knew how to find it.

Christmas Day, Judge Crooker had presented him with a beautiful copy of Raphael's *Madonna and Child*.

"It's the greatest theme and the greatest picture this poor world of ours can boast of," said the Judge. "I want you to study the look in that mother's face, not

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

that it is unusual. — have seen the like of it a hundred times. Almost every young mother with a child in her arms has that look or ought to have it—the most beautiful and mysterious thing in the world. The light of that old star which led the wise men is in it, I sometimes think. Study it and you may hear voices in the sky as did the shepherds of old.”

So the boy acquired the companionship of those divine faces that looked down at him from the wall near his bed and had something to say to him every day.

Also, another friend—a very humble one—had begun to share his confidence. He was the little yellow dog, Christmas. He had come with his master, one evening in March, to spend a night with the sick Shepherd. Christmas had lain on the foot of the bed and felt the loving caress of the boy. He never forgot it. The heart of the world, that loves above all things the touch of a kindly hand, was in this little

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

creature. Often, when Hiram was walking out in the bitter winds, Christmas would edge away when his master's back was turned. In a jiffy, he was out of sight and making with all haste for the door of the Widow Moran. There, he never failed to receive some token of the generous woman's understanding of the great need of dogs—a bone or a doughnut or a slice of bread soaked in meat gravy—and a warm welcome from the boy above stairs. The boy always had time to pet him and play with him. He was never fooling the days away with an axe and a saw in the cold wind. Christmas admired his master's ability to pick up logs of wood and heave them about and to make a great noise with an axe but, in cold weather, all that was a bore to him. When he had been missing, Hiram Blenkinsop found him, always, at the day's end lying comfortably on Bob Moran's bed.

May had returned with its warm sun-

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

light. The robins had come back. The blue martins had taken possession of the bird house. The grass had turned green on the garden borders and was now sprinkled with the golden glow of dandelions. The leaves were coming but Pat Crowley was no longer at work in the garden. He had fallen before the pestilence. Old Bill Rutherford was working there. The Shepherd was at the open window every day, talking with him and watching and feeding the birds.

Now, with the spring, a new feeling had come to Mr. Hiram Blenkinsop. He had been sober for months. His Old Self had come back and had imparted his youthful strength to the man Hiram. He had money in the bank. He was decently dressed. People had begun to respect him. Every day, Hiram was being nudged and worried by a new thought. It persisted in telling him that respectability was like the

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

Fourth of July—a very dull thing unless it was celebrated. He had been greatly pleased with his own growing respectability. He felt as if he wanted to take a look at it, from a distance, as it were. That money in the bank was also nudging and calling him. It seemed to be lonely and longing for companionship.

“Come, Hiram Blenkinsop,” it used to say. “Let’s go off together and get a silk hat and a gold headed cane an’ make ‘em set up an’ take notice. Suppose you should die sudden an’ leave me without an owner?”

The warmth and joy of the springtime had turned his fancy to the old dream. So one day, he converted his bank balance into “a roll big enough to choke a dog,” and took the early morning train to Hazelmead, having left Christmas at the Widow Moran’s.

In the mill city he bought a high silk hat and a gold headed cane and a new suit of

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

clothes and a boiled shirt and a high collar and a red necktie. It didn't matter to him that the fashion and fit of his garments were not quite in keeping with the silk hat and gold headed cane. There were three other items in the old dream of splendor—the mother, the prancing team, and the envious remarks of the onlookers. His mother was gone. Also there were no prancing horses in Hazelmead, but he could hire an automobile.

In the course of his celebration he asked a lady, whom he met in the street, if she would kindly be his mother for a day. He meant well but the lady, being younger than Hiram and not accustomed to such familiarity from strangers, did not feel complimented by the question. They fled from each other. Soon, Hiram bought a big custard pie in a bake-shop and had it cut into smallish pieces and, having purchased pie and plate, went out upon the street with it. He ate what he wanted of

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

the pie and generously offered the rest of it to sundry people who passed him. It was not impertinence in Hiram; it was pure generosity—a desire to share his riches, flavored, in some degree, by a feeling of vanity. It happened that Mr. J. Patterson Bing came along and received a tender of pie from Mr. Blenkinsop.

“No!” said Mr. Bing, with that old hammer whack in his voice which aroused bitter memories in the mind of Hiram.

That tone was a great piece of imprudence. There was a menacing gesture and a rapid succession of footsteps on the pavement. Mr. Bing’s retreat was not, however, quite swift enough to save him. The pie landed on his shoulder. In a moment, Hiram was arrested and marching toward the lockup while Mr. Bing went to the nearest drug store to be cleaned and scoured.

A few days later Hiram Blenkinsop

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

arrived in Bingville. Mr. Singleton met him on the street and saw to his deep regret that Hiram had been drinking.

"I've made up my mind that religion is good for some folks, but it won't do for me," said the latter.

"Why not?" the minister asked.

"I can't afford it."

"Have you found religion a luxury?" Mr. Singleton asked.

"It's grand while it lasts, but it's like p'ison gettin' over it," said Hiram. "I feel kind o' ruined."

"You look it," said the minister, with a glance at Hiram's silk hat and soiled clothing. "A long spell of sobriety is hard on a man if he quits it sudden. You've had your day of trial, my friend. We all have to be tried soon or late. People begin to say, 'At last he's come around all right. He's a good fellow.' And the Lord says: 'Perhaps he's worthy of better things. I'll try him and see.'

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

"That's His way of pushing people along, Hiram. He doesn't want them to stand still. You've had your trial and failed, but you mustn't give up. When your fun turns into sorrow, as it will, come back to me and we'll try again."

Hiram sat dozing in a corner of the bar-room of the Eagle Hotel that day. He had been ashamed to go to his comfortable room over the garage. He did not feel entitled to the hospitality of Mr. Singleton. Somehow, he couldn't bear the thought of going there. His new clothes and silk hat were in a state which excited the derision of small boys and audible comment from all observers while he had been making his way down the street. His money was about gone. The barkeeper had refused to sell him any more drink. In the early dusk he went out-of-doors. It was almost as warm as midsummer and the sky was clear. He called at the door of the Widow

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

Moran for his dog. In a moment, Christmas came down from the Shepherd's room and greeted his master with fond affection. The two went away together. They walked up a deserted street and around to the old graveyard. When it was quite dark, they groped their way through the weedy, briered aisles, between moss-covered toppling stones, to their old nook under the ash tree. There Hiram made a bed of boughs, picked from the evergreens that grew in the graveyard, and lay down upon it under his overcoat with the dog Christmas. He found it impossible to sleep, however. When he closed his eyes a new thought began nudging him.

It seemed to be saying, "What are you going to do now, Mr. Hiram Blenkinsop?"

He was pleased that it seemed to say Mr. Hiram Blenkinsop. He lay for a long time looking up at the starry moonlit sky, and at the marble, weather-spotted angel on the monument to the Reverend Thad-

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

deus Sneed, who had been lying there, among the rude forefathers of the village, since 1806. Suddenly the angel began to move. Mr. Blenkinsop observed with alarm that it had discovered him and that its right forefinger was no longer directed toward the sky but was pointing at his face. The angel had assumed the look and voice of his Old Self and was saying:

“I don’t see why angels are always cut in marble an’ set up in graveyards with nothing to do but point at the sky. It’s a cold an’ lonesome business. Why don’t you give me a job?”

His Old Self vanished and, as it did so, the spotted angel fell to coughing and sneezing. It coughed and sneezed so loudly that the sound went echoing in the distant sky and so violently that it reeled and seemed to be in danger of falling. Mr. Blenkinsop awoke with a rude jump so that the dog Christmas barked in alarm. It was nothing but the midnight train from

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

the south pulling out of the station which was near the old graveyard. The spotted angel stood firmly in its place and was pointing at the sky as usual.

It was probably an hour or so later, when Mr. Blenkinsop was awakened by the barking of the dog Christmas. He quieted the dog and listened. He heard a sound like that of a baby crying. It awoke tender memories in the mind of Hiram Blenkinsop. One very sweet recollection was about all that the barren, bitter years of his young manhood had given him worth having. It was the recollection of a little child which had come to his home in the first year of his married life.

“She lived eighteen months and three days and four hours,” he used to say, in speaking of her, with a tender note in his voice.

Almost twenty years, she had been lying in the old graveyard near the ash tree. Since then the voice of a child crying

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

always halted his steps. It is probable that, in her short life, the neglected, pathetic child Pearl—that having been her name—had protested much against a plentiful lack of comfort and sympathy.

So Mr. Blenkinsop's agitation at the sound of a baby crying somewhere near him, in the darkness of the old graveyard, was quite natural and will be readily understood. He rose on his elbow and listened. Again he heard that small, appealing voice.

“By thunder! Christmas,” he whispered. “If that ain’t like Pearl when she was a little, teeny, weeny thing no bigger’n a pint o’ beer! Say it is, sir, sure as sin!”

He scrambled to his feet, suddenly, for now, also, he could distinctly hear the voice of a woman crying. He groped his way in the direction from which the sound came and soon discovered the woman. She was kneeling on a grave with a child in

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

her arms. Her grief touched the heart of the man.

“Who be you?” he asked.

“I’m cold, and my baby is sick, and I have no friends,” she sobbed.

“Yes, ye have!” said Hiram Blenkinsop. “I don’t care who ye be. I’m yer friend and don’t ye fergit it.”

There was a reassuring note in the voice of Hiram Blenkinsop. Its gentleness had in it a quiver of sympathy. She felt it and gave to him—an unknown, invisible man, with just a quiver of sympathy in his voice—her confidence

If ever any one was in need of sympathy, she was at that moment. She felt that she must speak out to some one. So keenly she felt the impulse that she had been speaking to the stars and the cold grave-stones. Here at last was a human being with a quiver of sympathy in his voice.

“I thought I would come home, but

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

when I got here I was afraid," the girl moaned. "I wish I could die."

"No, ye don't neither!" said Hiram Blenkinsop. "Sometimes, I've thought that I hadn't no friends an' wanted to die, but I was just foolin' myself. To be sure, I ain't had no baby on my hands but I've had somethin' just as worrisome, I guess. Folks like you an' me has got friends a-plenty if we'll only give 'em a chance. I've found that out. You let me take that baby an' come with me. I know where you'll git the glad hand. You just come right along with me."

The unmistakable note of sincerity was in the voice of Hiram Blenkinsop. She gave the baby into his arms. He held it to his breast a moment thinking of old times. Then he swung his arms like a cradle saying:

"You stop your hollerin'—ye gol'darn little skeezucks! It ain't decent to go on that way in a graveyard an' ye ought to

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

know it. Be ye tryin' to wake the dead?"

The baby grew quiet and finally fell asleep.

"Come on, now," said Hiram, with the baby lying against his breast. "You an' me are goin' out o' the past. I know a little house that's next door to Heaven. They say ye can see Heaven from its widders. It's where the good Shepherd lives. Christmas an' I know the place—don't we, ol' boy? Come right along. There ain't no kind o' doubt o' what they'll say to us."

The young woman followed him out of the old graveyard and through the dark, deserted streets until they came to the cottage of the Widow Moran. They passed through the gate into Judge Crooker's garden. Under the Shepherd's window, Hiram Blenkinsop gave the baby to its mother and with his hands to his mouth called "Bob!" in a loud whisper. Sud-

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

denly a robin sounded his alarm. Instantly, the Shepherd's room was full of light. In a moment, he was at the window sweeping the garden paths and the tree tops with his search-light. It fell on the sorrowful figure of the young mother with the child in her arms and stopped. She stood looking up at the window bathed in the flood of light. It reminded the Shepherd of that glow which the wise men saw in the manger at Bethlehem.

"Pauline Baker!" he exclaimed. "Have you come back or am I dreaming? It's you—thanks to the Blessed Virgin! It's you! Come around to the door. My mother will let you in."

It was a warm welcome that the girl received in the little home of the Widow Moran. Many words of comfort and good cheer were spoken in the next hour or so after which the good woman made tea and toast and broiled a chop and served them in the Shepherd's room.

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

"God love ye, child! So he was a married man—bad 'cess to him an' the likes o' him!" she said as she came in with the tray. "Mother o' Jesus! What a wicked world it is!"

The prudent dog Christmas, being afraid of babies, hid under the Shepherd's bed, and Hiram Blenkinsop lay down for the rest of the night on the lounge in the cottage kitchen.

An hour after daylight, when the Judge was walking in his garden, he wondered why the widow and the Shepherd were sleeping so late.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### IN WHICH HIGH VOLTAGE DEVELOPS IN THE CONVERSATION

IT WAS a warm, bright May day. There was not a cloud in the sky. Roger Delane had arrived and the Bings were giving a dinner that evening. The best people of Hazelmead were coming over in motor-cars. Phyllis and Roger had had a long ride together that day on the new Kentucky saddle horses. Mrs. Bing had spent the morning in Hazelmead and had stayed to lunch with Mayor and Mrs. Stacy. She had returned at four and cut some flowers for the table and gone to her room for an hour's rest when the young people returned. She was not yet asleep when Phyllis came into the big bedroom. Mrs. Bing lay among the cushions on her

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

couch. She partly rose, tumbled the cushions into a pile and leaned against them.

"Heavens! I'm tired!" she exclaimed. "These women in Hazelmead hang on to one like a lot of hungry cats. They all want money for one thing or another—Red Cross or Liberty bonds or fatherless children or tobacco for the soldiers or books for the library. My word! I'm broke and it seems as if each of my legs hung by a thread."

Phyllis smiled as she stood looking down at her mother.

"How beautiful you look!" the fond mother exclaimed. "If he didn't propose to-day, he's a chump."

"But he did," said Phyllis. "I tried to keep him from it, but he just would propose in spite of me."

The girl's face was red and serious. She sat down in a chair and began to remove her hat. Mrs. Bing rose suddenly, and stood facing Phyllis.

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

“I thought you loved him,” she said with a look of surprise.

“So I do,” the girl answered.

“What did you say?”

“I said no.”

“What!”

“I refused him!”

“For God’s sake, Phyllis! Do you think you can afford to play with a man like that? He won’t stand for it.”

“Let him sit for it then and, mother, you might as well know, first as last, that I am not playing with him.”

There was a calm note of firmness in the voice of the girl. She was prepared for this scene. She had known it was coming. Her mother was hot with irritating astonishment. The calmness of the girl in suddenly beginning to dig a grave for this dear ambition—rich with promise—in the very day when it had come submissively to their feet, stung like the tooth of a ser-

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

pent. She stood very erect and said with an icy look in her face:

“You young upstart! What do you mean?”

There was a moment of frigid silence in which both of the women began to turn cold. Then Phyllis answered very calmly as she sat looking down at the bunch of violets in her hand:

“It means that I am married, mother.”

Mrs. Bing’s face turned red. There was a little convulsive movement of the muscles around her mouth. She folded her arms on her breast, lifted her chin a bit higher and asked in a polite tone, although her words fell like fragments of cracked ice:

“Married! To whom are you married?”

“To Gordon King.”

Phyllis spoke casually as if he were a piece of ribbon that she had bought at a store.

Mrs. Bing sank into a chair and covered

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

her face with her hands for half a moment. Suddenly she picked up a slipper that lay at her feet and flung it at the girl.

“My God!” she exclaimed. “What a nasty liar you are!”

It was not ladylike but, at that moment, the lady was temporarily absent.

“Mother, I’m glad you say that,” the girl answered still very calmly, although her fingers trembled a little as she felt the violets, and her voice was not quite steady. “It shows that I am not so stupid at home as I am at school.”

The girl rose and threw down the violets and her mild and listless manner. A look of defiance filled her face and figure. Mrs. Bing arose, her eyes aglow with anger.

“I’d like to know what you mean,” she said under her breath.

“I mean that if I am a liar, you taught me how to be it. Ever since I was knee-high, you have been teaching me to deceive

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

my father. I am not going to do it any longer. I am going to find my father and tell him the truth. I shall not wait another minute. He will give me better advice than you have given, I hope."

The words had fallen rapidly from her lips and, as the last one was spoken, she hurried out of the room. Mrs. Bing threw herself on the couch where she lay with certain bitter memories, until the new maid came to tell her that it was time to dress.

She was like one reminded of mortality after coming out of ether.

"Oh, Lord!" she murmured wearily. "I feel like going to bed! How *can* I live through that dinner? Please bring me some brandy."

Phyllis learned that her father was at his office whither she proceeded without a moment's delay. She sent in word that she must see him alone and as soon as possible. He dismissed the men with whom

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

he had been talking and invited her into his private office.

“Well, girl, I guess I know what is on your mind,” he said. “Go ahead.”

Phyllis began to cry.

“All right! You do the crying and I’ll do the talking,” he went on. “I feel like doing the crying myself, but if you want the job I’ll resign it to you. Perhaps you can do enough of that for both of us. I began to smell a rat the other day. So I sent for Gordon King. He came here this morning. I had a long talk with him. He told me the truth. Why didn’t you tell me? What’s the good of having a father unless you use him at times when his counsel is likely to be worth having? I would have made a good father, if I had had half a chance. I should like to have been your friend and confidant in this important enterprise. I could have been a help to you. But, somehow, I couldn’t get on the board of directors. You and your mother have

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

been running the plant all by yourselves and I guess it's pretty near bankrupt. Now, my girl, there's no use crying over spilt tears. Gordon King is not the man of my choice, but we must all take hold and try to build him up. Perhaps we can make him pay."

"I do not love him," Phyllis sobbed.

"You married him because you wanted to. You were not coerced?"

"No, sir."

"I'm sorry, but you'll have to take your share of the crow with the rest of us," he went on, with a note of sternness in his tone. "My girl, when I make a contract I live up to it and I intend that you shall do the same. You'll have to learn to love and cherish this fellow, if he makes it possible. I'll have no welching in my family. You and your mother believe in woman's rights. I don't object to that, but you mustn't think that you have the right to break your agreements unless

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

there's a good reason for it. My girl, the marriage contract is the most binding and sacred of all contracts. I want you to do your best to make this one a success."

There was the tinkle of the telephone bell. Mr. Bing put the receiver to his ear and spoke into the instrument as follows:

"Yes, she's here! I knew all the facts before she told me. Mr. Delane? He's on his way back to New York. Left on the six-ten. Charged me to present his regrets and farewells to you and Phyllis. I thought it best for him to know and to go. Yes, we're coming right home to dress. Mr. King will take Mr. Delane's place at the table. We'll make a clean breast of the whole business. Brace up and eat your crow with a smiling face. I'll make a little speech and present Mr. and Mrs. King to our friends at the end of it. Oh, now, cut out the sobbing and leave this unfinished business to me and don't worry. We'll be home in three minutes."

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### IN WHICH JUDGE CROOKER DELIVERS A FEW OPINIONS

THE pride of Bingville had fallen in the dust! It had arisen and gone on with soiled garments and lowered head. It had suffered derision and defeat. It could not ever be the same again. Sneed and Snodgrass recovered, in a degree, from their feeling of opulence. Sneed had become polite, industrious and obliging. Snodgrass and others had lost heavily in stock speculation through the failure of a broker in Hazelmead. They went to work with a will and without the haughty independence which, for a time, had characterized their attitude. The spirit of the Little Shepherd had entered the hearts and home of Emanuel Baker and his wife.

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

Pauline and the baby were there and being tenderly loved and cared for. But what humility had entered that home! Phyllis and her husband lived with her parents, Gordon having taken a humble place in the mill. He worked early and late. The Bings had made it hard for him, finding it difficult to overcome their resentment, but he stood the gaff, as they say, and won the regard of J. Patterson although Mrs. Bing could never forgive him.

In June, there had been a public meeting in the Town Hall addressed by Judge Crooker and the Reverend Mr. Singleton. The Judge had spoken of the grinding of the mills of God that was going on the world over.

“Our civilization has had its time of trial not yet ended,” he began. “Its enemies have been busy in every city and village. Not only in the cities and villages of France and Belgium have they been busy, but in those of our own land. The Goths

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

and Vandals have invaded Bingville. They have been destroying the things we loved. The false god is in our midst. Many here, within the sound of my voice, have a god suited to their own tastes and sins—an obedient, tractable, boneless god. It is my deliberate opinion that the dances and costumes and moving pictures we have seen in Bingville are doing more injury to Civilization than all the guns of Germany. My friends, you can do nothing worse for my daughter than deprive her of her modesty and I would rather, far rather, see you slay my son than destroy his respect for law and virtue and decency.

“The jazz band is to me a sign of spiritual decay. It is a step toward the jungle. I hear in it the beating of the tom-tom. It is not music. It is the barbaric yawp of sheer recklessness and daredevilism, and it is everywhere.

“Even in our economic life we are dancing to the jazz band and with utter reck-

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

lessness. American labor is being more and more absorbed in the manufacture of luxuries—embroidered frocks and elaborate millinery and limousines and landaulets and rich upholstery and cord tires and golf courses and sporting goods and great country houses—so that there is not enough labor to provide the comforts and necessities of life.

“The tendency of all this is to put the stamp of luxury upon the commonest needs of man. The time seems to be near when a boiled egg and a piece of buttered bread will be luxuries and a family of children an unspeakable extravagance. Let us face the facts. It is up to Vanity to moderate its demands upon the industry of man. What we need is more devotion to simple living and the general welfare. In plain old-fashioned English we need the religion and the simplicity of our fathers.”

Later, in June, a strike began in the big

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

plant of J. Patterson Bing. The men demanded higher pay and shorter days. They were working under a contract but that did not seem to matter. In a fight with "scabs" and Pinkerton men they destroyed a part of the plant. Even the life of Mr. Bing was threatened! The summer was near its end when J. Patterson Bing and a committee of the labor union met in the office of Judge Crooker to submit their differences to that impartial magistrate for adjustment. The Judge listened patiently and rendered his decision. It was accepted.

When the papers were signed, Mr. Bing rose and said, "Your Honor, there's one thing I want to say. I have spent most of my life in this town. I have built up a big business here and doubled the population. I have built comfortable homes for my laborers and taken an interest in the education of their children, and built a library where any one could find the best

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

books to read. I have built playgrounds for the children of the working people. If I have heard of any case of need, I have done my best to relieve it. I have always been ready to hear complaints and treat them fairly. My men have been generously paid and yet they have not hesitated to destroy my property and to use guns and knives and clubs and stones to prevent the plant from filling its contracts and to force their will upon me. How do you explain it? What have I done or failed to do that has caused this bitterness?"

"Mr. Bing, I am glad that you ask me that question," the old Judge began. "It gives me a chance to present to you, and to these men who work for you, a conviction which has grown out of impartial observation of your relations with each other.

"First, I want to say to you, Mr. Bing, that I regard you as a good citizen. Your genius and generosity have put this community under great obligation. Now, in

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

heading toward the hidden cause of your complaint, I beg to ask you a question at the outset. Do you know that unfortunate son of the Widow Moran known as the Shepherd of the Birds?"

"I have heard much about him," Mr. Bing answered.

"Do you know him?"

"No. I have had letters from him acknowledging favors now and then, but I do not know him."

"We have hit at once the source of your trouble," the Judge went on. "The Shepherd is a representative person. He stands for the poor and the unfortunate in this village. You have never gone to see him because—well, probably it was because you feared that the look of him would distress you. The thing which would have helped and inspired and gladdened his heart more than anything else would have been the feel of your hand and a kind and cheering word and sympathetic counsel.

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

Under those circumstances, I think I may say that it was your duty as a neighbor and a human being to go to see him. Instead of that you sent money to him. Now, he never needed money. In the kindest spirit, I ask you if that money you sent to him in the best of good-will was not, in fact, a species of bribery? Were you not, indeed, seeking to buy immunity from a duty incumbent upon you as a neighbor and a human being?"

Mr. Bing answered quickly, "There are plenty of people who have nothing else to do but carry cheer and comfort to the unfortunate. I have other things to do."

"That, sir, does not relieve you of the liabilities of a neighbor and a human being, in my view. If your business has turned you into a shaft or a cog-wheel, it has done you a great injustice. I fear that it has been your master—that it has practised upon you a kind of despotism. You

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

would better get along with less—far less business than suffer such a fate. I don't want to hurt you. We are looking for the cause of a certain result and I can help you only by being frank. With all your generosity you have never given your heart to this village. Some unkind people have gone so far as to say that you have no heart. You can not prove it with money that you do not miss. Money is good but it must be warmed with sympathy and some degree of sacrifice. Has it never occurred to you that the warm hand and the cheering word in season are more, vastly more, than money in the important matter of making good-will? Unconsciously, you have established a line and placed yourself on one side of it and the people on the other. Broadly speaking, you are capital and the rest are labor. Whereas, in fact, you are all working men. Some of the rest have come to regard you as their natural enemy. They ought to

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

regard you as their natural friend. Two kinds of despotism have prevented it. First, there is the despotism of your business in making you a slave—so much of a slave that you haven't time to be human; second, there is the despotism of the labor union in discouraging individual excellence, in demanding equal pay for the faithful man and the slacker, and in denying the right of free men to labor when and where they will. All this is tyranny as gross and un-American as that of George the Third in trying to force his will upon the colonies. If America is to survive, we must set our faces against every form of tyranny. The remedy for all our trouble and bitterness is real democracy which is nothing more or less than the love of men—the love of justice and fair play for each and all.

“You men should know that every strike increases the burdens of the people. Every day your idleness lifts the price of their

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

necessities. Idleness is just another form of destruction. Why could you not have listened to the counsel of Reason in June instead of in September, and thus have saved these long months of loss and hardship and bitter violence? It was because the spirit of Tyranny had entered your heart and put your judgment in chains. It had blinded you to honor also, for your men were working under contract. If the union is to command the support of honest men, it must be honest. It was Tyranny that turned the treaty with Belgium into a scrap of paper. That kind of a thing will not do here. Let me assure you that Tyranny has no right to be in this land of ours. You remind me of the Prodigal Son who had to know the taste of husks and the companionship of swine before he came to himself. Do you not know that Tyranny is swine and the fodder of swine? It is simply human hoggishness.

“I have one thing more to say and I am

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

finished. Mr. Bing, some time ago you threw up your religion without realizing the effect that such an act would be likely to produce on this community. You are, no doubt, aware that many followed your example. I've got no preaching to do. I'm just going to quote you a few words from an authority no less respectable than George Washington himself. Our history has made one fact very clear, namely, that he was a wise and far-seeing man."

Judge Crooker took from a shelf, John Marshall's "Life of Washington," and read:

*"It is substantially true that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government and let us, with caution, indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion.*

*"Let it simply be asked where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if a sense of religious obligation de-*

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

*sert the oaths which are the instruments of investigation in courts of justice?"*

"Let me add, on my own account, that the treatment you receive from your men will vary according to their respect for morality and religion.

"They could manage very well with an irreligious master, for you are only one. But an irreligious mob is a different and highly serious matter, believe me. Away back in the seventeenth century, John Dryden wrote a wise sentence. It was this:

*"I have heard, indeed, of some very virtuous persons who have ended unfortunately but never of a virtuous nation; Providence is engaged too deeply when the cause becomes general."*

"If virtue is the price of a nation's life, let us try to keep our own nation virtuous.' "

Mr. Bing and his men left the Judge's

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

office in a thoughtful mood. The next day, Judge Crooker met the mill owner on the street.

"Judge, I accept your verdict," said the latter. "I fear that I have been rather careless. It didn't occur to me that my example would be taken so seriously. I have been a prodigal and have resolved to return to my father's house."

"Ho, servants!" said the Judge, with a smile. "Bring forth the best robe and put it on him and put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet and bring hither the fatted calf and kill it and let us eat and be merry."

"We shall have to postpone the celebration," said Mr. Bing. "I have to go to New York to-night, and I sail for England to-morrow. But I shall return before Christmas."

A little farther on Mr. Bing met Hiram Blenkinsop. The latter had a plank on his shoulder.

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

"I'd like to have a word with you," said the mill owner as he took hold of the plank and helped Hiram to ease it down. "I hear many good things about you, Mr. Blenkinsop. I fear that we have all misjudged you. If I have ever said or done anything to hurt your feelings, I am sorry for it."

Hiram Blenkinsop looked with astonishment into the eyes of the millionaire.

"I—I guess I ain't got you placed right—not eggzac'ly," said he. "Some folks ain't as good as they look an' some ain't as bad as they look. I wouldn't wonder if we was mostly purty much alike, come to shake us down."

"Let's be friends, anyhow," said Mr. Bing. "If there's anything I can do for you, let me know."

That evening, as he sat by the stove in his little room over the garage of Mr. Singleton with his dog Christmas lying beside him, Mr. Blenkinsop fell asleep

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

and awoke suddenly with a wild yell of alarm.

"What's the matter?" a voice inquired.

Mr. Blenkinsop turned and saw his Old Self standing in the doorway.

"Nothin' but a dream," said Blenkinsop as he wiped his eyes. "Dreamed I had a dog with a terrible thirst on him. Used to lead him around with a rope an' when we come to a brook he'd drink it dry. Suddenly I felt an awful jerk on the rope that sent me up in the air an' I looked an' see that the dog had turned into an elephant an' that he was goin' like Sam Hill, an' that I was hitched to him and couldn't let go. Once in a while he'd stop an' drink a river dry an' then he'd lay down an' rest. Everybody was scared o' the elephant an' so was I. An' I'd try to cut the rope with my jack knife but it wouldn't cut—it was so dull. Then all of a sudden he'd start on the run an' twitch me over the hills an' mountings, an' me

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

takin' steps a mile long an' scared to death."

"The fact is you're hitched to an elephant," his Old Self remarked. "The first thing to do is to sharpen your jack knife."

"It's Night an' Silence that sets him goin'," said Blenkinsop. "When they come he's apt to start for the nighest river. The old elephant is beginnin' to move."

Blenkinsop put on his hat and hurried out of the door.

## CHAPTER NINE

### WHICH TELLS OF A MERRY CHRISTMAS DAY IN THE LITTLE COTTAGE OF THE WIDOW MORAN

NIGHT and Silence are a stern test of wisdom. For years, the fun loving, chattersome Blenkinsop had been their enemy and was not yet at peace with them. But Night and Silence had other enemies in the village—ancient and inconsolable enemies, it must be said. They were the cocks of Bingville. Every morning they fell to and drove Night and Silence out of the place and who shall say that they did not save it from being hopelessly overwhelmed. Day was their victory and they knew how to achieve it. Noise was the thing most needed. So they roused the people and called up the lights and set the griddles rattling. The great, white cock

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

that roosted near the window in the Widow Moran's hen-house watched for the first sign of weakness in the enemy. When it came, he sent forth a bolt of sound that tumbled Silence from his throne and shook the foundations of the great dome of Night. It rang over the housetops and through every street and alley in the village. That started the battle. Silence tried in vain to recover his seat. In a moment, every cock in Bingville was hurling bombs at him. Immediately, Darkness began to grow pale with fright. Seeing the fate of his ally, he broke camp and fled westward. Soon the field was clear and every proud cock surveyed the victory with a solemn sense of large accomplishment.

The loud victorious trumpets sounding in the garden near the window of the Shepherd awoke him that Christmas morning. The dawn light was on the windows.

"Merry Christmas!" said the little

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

round nickel clock in a cheerful tone. "It's time to get up!"

"Is it morning?" the Shepherd asked drowsily, as he rubbed his eyes.

"Sure it's morning!" the little clock answered. "That lazy old sun is late again. He ought to be up and at work. He's like a dishonest hired man."

"He's apt to be slow on Christmas morning," said the Shepherd.

"Then people blame me and say I'm too fast," the little clock went on. "They don't know what an old shirk the sun can be. I've been watching him for years and have never gone to sleep at my post."

After a moment of silence the little clock went on: "Hello! The old night is getting a move on it. The cocks are scaring it away. Santa Claus has been here. He brought ever so many things. The midnight train stopped."

"I wonder who came," said the Shepherd.

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

“I guess it was the Bings,” the clock answered.

Just then it struck seven.

“There, I guess that’s about the end of it,” said the little clock.

“Of what?” the Shepherd asked.

“Of the nineteen hundred and eighteen years. You know seven is the favored number in sacred history. I’m sure the baby would have been born at seven. My goodness! There’s a lot of ticking in all that time. I’ve been going only twelve years and I’m nearly worn out. Some young clock will have to take my job before long.”

These reflections of the little clock were suddenly interrupted. The Shepherd’s mother entered with a merry greeting and turned on the lights. There were many bundles lying about. She came and kissed her son and began to build a fire in the little stove.

“This’ll be the merriest Christmas in

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

yer life, laddie boy," she said, as she lit the kindlings. "A great doctor has come up with the Bings to see ye. He says he'll have ye out-o'-doors in a little while."

"Ho, ho! That looks like the war was nearly over," said Mr. Bloggs.

Mrs. Moran did not hear the remark of the little tin soldier so she rattled on:

"I went over to the station to meet 'em last night. Mr. Blenkinsop has brought us a fine turkey. We'll have a gran' dinner—sure we will—an' I axed Mr. Blenkinsop to come an' eat with us."

Mrs. Moran opened the gifts and spread them on the bed. There were books and paints and brushes and clothing and silver articles and needle-work and a phonograph and a check from Mr. Bing.

The little cottage had never seen a day so full of happiness. It rang with talk and merry laughter and the music of the phonograph. Mr. Blenkinsop had come in his best mood and apparel with the dog

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

Christmas. He helped Mrs. Moran to set the table in the Shepherd's room and brought up the platter with the big brown turkey on it, surrounded by sweet potatoes, all just out of the oven. Mrs. Moran followed with the jelly and the creamed onions and the steaming coffee pot and new celery. The dog Christmas growled and ran under the bed when he saw his master coming with that unfamiliar burden.

"He's never seen a Christmas dinner before. I don't wonder he's kind o' scairt! I ain't seen one in so long, I'm scairt myself," said Hiram Blenkinsop as they sat down at the table.

"What's scairin' ye, man?" said the widow.

"'Fraid I'll wake up an' find myself dreamin'," Mr. Blenkinsop answered.

"Nobody ever found himself dreamin' at my table," said Mrs. Moran. "Grab the carvin' knife an' go to wurruk, man."

"I ain't eggzac'ly used to this kind of

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

a job, but if you'll look out o' the winder, I'll have it chopped an' split an' corded in a minute," said Mr. Blenkinsop.

He got along very well with his task. When they began eating he remarked, "I've been lookin' at that pictur' of a girl with a baby in her arms. Brings the water to my eyes, it's so kind o' life like and nat'r'al. It's an A number one pictur' —no mistake."

He pointed at a large painting on the wall.

"It's Pauline!" said the Shepherd.

"Sure she's one o' the saints o' God!" the widow exclaimed. "She's started a school for the children o' them Eytalians an' Poles. She's tryin' to make 'em good Americans."

"I'll never forget that night," Mr. Blenkinsop remarked.

"If ye don't fergit it, I'll never mend another hole in yer pants," the widow answered.

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

"I've never blabbed a word about it to any one but Mr. Singleton."

"Keep that in yer soul, man. It's yer ticket to Paradise," said the widow.

"She goes every day to teach the Poles and Italians, but I have her here with me always," the Shepherd remarked. "I'm glad when the morning comes so that I can see her again."

"God bless the child! We was sorry to lose her but we have the pictur' an' the look o' her with the love o' God in her face," said the Widow Moran.

"Now light yer pipe and take yer comfort, man," said the hospitable widow, after the dishes were cleared away. "Sure it's more like Christmas to see a man an' a pipe in the house. Heavens, no! A man in the kitchen is worse than a hole in yer petticoat."

So Mr. Blenkinsop sat with the Shepherd while the widow went about her work. With his rumpled hair, clean

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

shaven face, long nose and prominent ears, he was not a handsome man.

"This is the top notch an' no mistake," he remarked as he lighted his pipe. "Blenkinsop is happy. He feels like his Old Self. He has no fault to find with anything or anybody."

Mr. Blenkinsop delivered this report on the state of his feelings with a serious look in his gray eyes.

"It kind o' reminds me o' the time when I used to hang up my stockin' an' look for the reindeer tracks in the snow on Christmas mornin'," he went on. "Since then, my ol' socks have been full o' pain an' trouble every Christmas."

"Those I knit for ye left here full of good wishes," said the Shepherd.

"Say, when I put 'em on this mornin' with the b'iled shirt an' the suit that Mr. Bing sent me, my Old Self came an' asked me where I was goin', an' when I said I was goin' to spen' Christmas with a re-

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

spectable fam'ly, he said, 'I guess I'll go with ye,' so here we be."

"The Old Selves of the village have all been kicked out-of-doors," said the Shepherd. "The other day you told me about the trouble you had had with yours. That night, all the Old Selves of Bingville got together down in the garden and talked and talked about their relatives so I couldn't sleep. It was a kind of Selfland. I told Judge Crooker about it and he said that that was exactly what was going on in the Town Hall the other night at the public meeting."

"The folks are drunk—as drunk as I was in Hazelmead last May," said Mr. Blenkinsop. "They have been drunk with gold and pleasure——"

"The fruit of the vine of plenty," said Judge Crooker, who had just come up the stairs. "Merry Christmas!" he exclaimed as he shook hands. "Mr. Blenkinsop, you look as if you were enjoying yourself."

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

"An' why not when yer Self has been away an' just got back?"

"And you've killed the fatted turkey," said the Judge, as he took out his silver snuff box. "One by one, the prodigals are returning."

They heard footsteps on the stairs and the merry voice of the Widow Moran. In a moment, Mr. and Mrs. Bing stood in the doorway.

"Mr. and Mrs. Bing, I want to make you acquainted with my very dear friend, Robert Moran," said Judge Crooker.

There were tears in the Shepherd's eyes as Mrs. Bing stooped and kissed him. He looked up at the mill owner as the latter took his hand.

"I am glad to see you," said Mr. Bing.

"Is this—is this Mr. J. Patterson Bing?" the Shepherd asked, his eyes wide with astonishment.

"Yes, and it is my fault that you do

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

not know me better. I want to be your friend.”

The Shepherd put his handkerchief over his eyes. His voice trembled when he said: “You have been very kind to us.”

“But I’m really hoping to do something for you,” Mr. Bing assured him. “I’ve brought a great surgeon from New York who thinks he can help you. He will be over to see you in the morning.”

They had a half-hour’s visit with the little Shepherd. Mr. Bing, who was a judge of good pictures, said that the boy’s work showed great promise and that his picture of the mother and child would bring a good price if he cared to sell it. When they arose to go, Mr. Blenkinsop thanked the mill owner for his Christmas suit.

“Don’t mention it,” said Mr. Bing.

“Well, it mentions itself purty middlin’ often,” Mr. Blenkinsop laughed.

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

"Is there anything else I can do for you?" the former asked.

"Well, sir, to tell ye the dead honest truth, I've got a new ambition," said Mr. Blenkinsop. "I've thought of it nights a good deal. I'd like to be sextunt o' the church an' ring that ol' bell."

"We'll see what can be done about it," Mr. Bing answered with a laugh, as they went down-stairs with Judge Crooker, followed by the dog Christmas, who scampered around them on the street with a merry growl of challenge, as if the spirit of the day were in him.

"What is it that makes the boy so appealing?" Mr. Bing asked of the Judge.

"He has a wonderful personality," Mrs. Bing remarked.

"Yes, he has that. But the thing that underlies and shines through it is his great attraction."

"What do you call it?" Mrs. Bing asked.

"A clean and noble spirit! Is there any

## THE PRODIGAL VILLAGE

other thing in this world that, in itself, is really worth having?"

"Compared with him, I recognize that I am very poor indeed," said J. Patterson Bing.

"You are what I would call a promising young man," the Judge answered. "If you don't get discouraged, you're going to amount to something. I am glad because you are, in a sense, the father of the great family of Bingville."

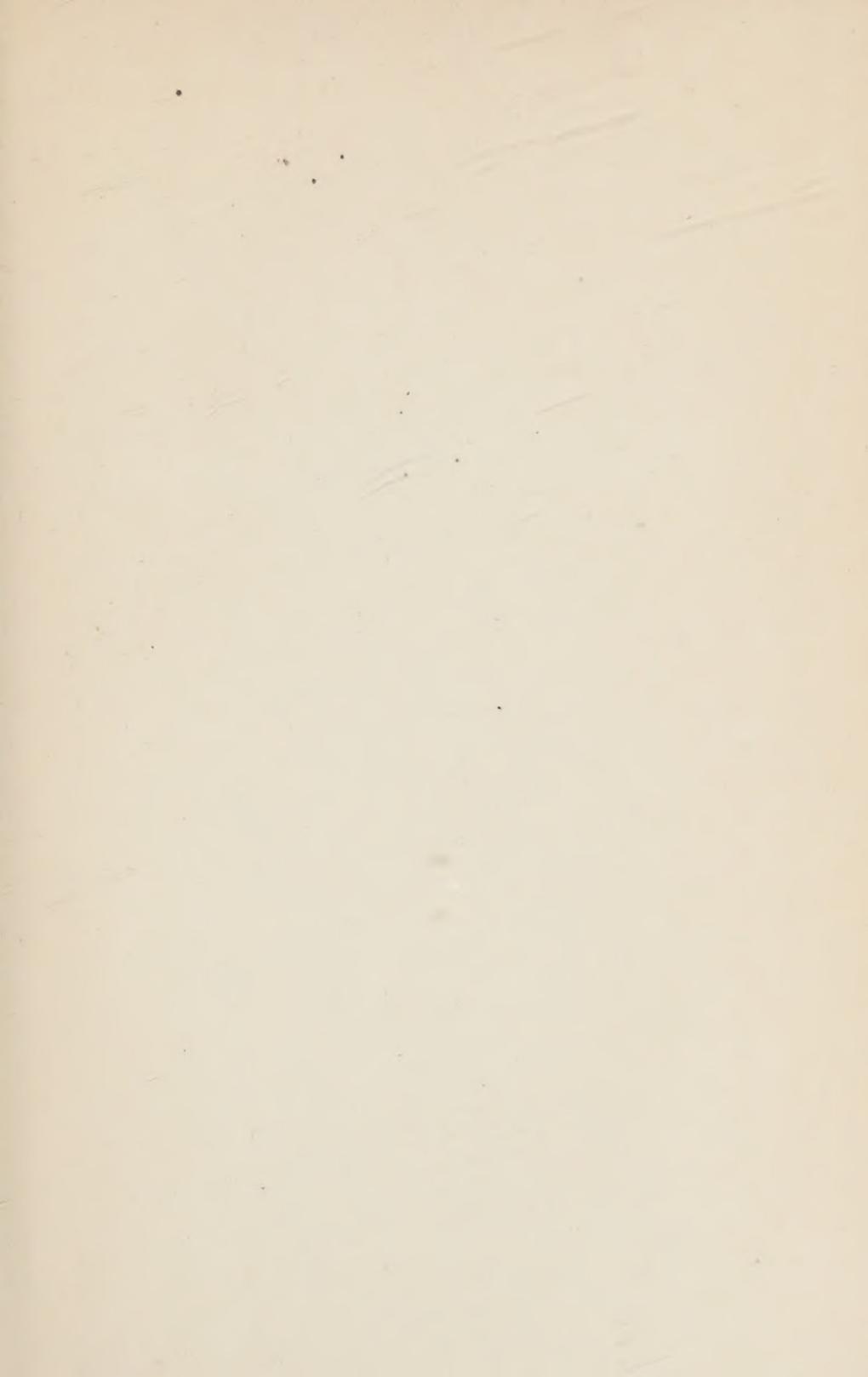
**THE END**











Augsburg Seminary  
Library

Date Loaned

Oct 29 '48

123

0

54

1930

81

81

1930

B12

B123

'54

XP

AUTHOR

Bacheller, Irving

TITLE

The Prodigal Will

81

1930

B123

XP

Augsburg Seminary  
Library

